



The Beginning After the End

Volume V: Convergence

BY TURTLEME

THE BEGINNING AFTER THE END

**- VOLUME 5 -
Convergence**

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Chapter 98

Floating Castle

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

“Arthur Leywin, son of Reynolds and Alice Leywin. The Council has decreed that, due to your recent actions of excessive violence and the inconclusive circumstances involved, your mana core will be restrained, your title as a mage will be stripped, and you will be incarcerated until further judgment.”

“...Effective immediately.”

Followed by those words from the female lance's mouth were three distinct reactions from the people around me. The first reaction was made by the curiously ignorant. They eyed me with looks of perplexion, studying my appearance as they tried to fit me with the edict that had been read aloud by the female lance:

Inconclusive circumstances.

Excessive violence.

I could feel their cautious skepticism as they silently tried to figure out how a boy, who was barely a teen, could cause the Council itself to issue the verdict instead of the city governor.

The second reaction was made by the ever-foolish faces of the all-accepting crowd. Those that blindly worshipped the Council as well as all forms of higher authority. They took the words written on the communication artifact as God's truth and looked at me with eyes of condemnation. Their whispers could even be heard from where I was standing as their eyes narrowed into a disdainful glare, believing that I was somehow responsible for everything that had happened inside the academy.

The third reaction was one that I had thought I would only receive from my family. No. To my surprise, the students and faculty that were involved in the incident—those that had the strength to still speak—all cried out in protest. Because my family was the closest, I could hear them the most clearly.

“Incarcer... Your Honour, there must be some sort of mistake,” my mother voiced out from behind the fence.

“Yes, I’m sure that there is an explanation for all of this. My son would never... there must be an explanation for all of this,” my father amended, knowing perfectly well what I was capable of.

There were other outcries of protest: some from students I recognized as well as from those who were simply stating the truth; all of which were ignored by the female lance.

“This makes no sense! How dare you punish the one who actually did some good. If it wasn’t for Arthur, you lances wouldn’t have had anyone left to save!” I turned my head towards the source of the voice. To my surprise, it was Kathlyn Glayder. She was marching in my direction with unbridled fury in her eyes; an expression I had neither seen nor expected from her.

“I will see to it that my mother and father will rescind this decree at once—”

“Your father and mother were the ones, along with King and Queen Greysunders, that had voted in favor of this judgment,” the female lance promptly interrupted. While her words were respectful, her expression and tone could only be depicted as indifferent and rude.

Before Kathlyn could get any closer, her brother held her back. I couldn’t hear what he had told her but the princess finally relented, her face still red and body shaking.

I knew that no matter how much I try to reason with the female lance, she wouldn’t listen. Letting me go wasn’t her decision to make.

“Can I speak to my family one last time before you take me?” I asked, my voice coming out more sullen than I had wished.

After receiving a terse nod from the female lance, I walk back to where my parents were leaning against the fence. For a few seconds, we just stared at each other, not knowing how to begin.

“Don’t look so sad, guys. Things will be better after this misunderstanding gets cleared up.” I let out a wide grin, hoping to mask my uncertainty. I had allies within the Council, but there were too many unknown factors at work here. I wasn’t so worried for myself as I was for Sylvie. To have a dragon alive in our continent wasn’t a matter that could

be waved off.

My facade must've faltered when I was focusing on my thoughts; my parents' expressions changed as both of them gazed at me, wide-eyed and afraid.

"Y-you... you honestly have no idea if you'll be able to come back to us, do you?" I couldn't meet my mother's eyes as she stuttered, her voice dripping with worry; I, instead, focused on her hand, her fingers were deathly pale and her nails red from how hard she was clenching onto the iron fence.

"Brother... you're not going to anywhere, right? This is all a joke, right? Right?" Ellie's face was a pale shade of crimson and I could tell she was doing her best to keep from breaking into sobs.

I leaned forward so I could be at eye-level with my sister. As I studied her childish face, I could hardly believe that she was already ten. One of my biggest regrets was not being able to be by her side as she grew up. I had met my sister for the first time when she was four, and even after that, I was only with her for weeks at a time. While looking at her, I could only hope that the next time I see her wouldn't be when she was a teen... or an adult.

I got back up, prying my gaze from Ellie whose face had been so tensed up that her lips were almost white. "I'll definitely return home." I turned back around just in time for my eyes to water without their notice.

The lance named Olfred conjured a stone knight beneath me, lifting me up as the female lance separated me from Sylvie, carrying her in an orb of conjured ice. Approaching us was Lance Bairon carrying the wrapped corpse of his deceased younger brother as his gaze continued to pierce through me with pure venom.

Like that, we departed. Bairon informed the others that he would be making a detour to his family's house to deliver Lucas' body for a proper funeral.

I wasn't sure if becoming a white core mage came with the ability to fly, but all three of the lances were capable of flying without the need to invoke any spells, including the conjured knight that was carrying me.

My eyes stayed fixed on Xyrus Academy as it grew increasingly smaller the farther we flew. The place itself didn't mean much to me, but my time at the school inside the floating City of Xyrus had been one as an ordinary student mage. I was considered

gifted then, but I was still just a student. As the distance between me and the academy increased, I had the notion that I was leaving my life as an ordinary student behind.

We travelled wordlessly through the sky as all attempts to start a conversation had been shot down. As gentle as they were in how they treated me, to them, I was still a prisoner waiting to be judged.

‘Papa, what’s going to happen to us?’ Sylvie voiced in my head.

‘I’m... not sure, Sylv. Don’t worry, though. We’ll be okay,’ I reassured. Even without her replying back, I could sense the emotions she was feeling: uncertainty, fear, confusion.

It was impossible to tell exactly how far we had travelled South, as all I could see below us was the Grand Mountains that divided the Continent of Dicathen in half.

“We should stop here for the night.” The female lance descended into the mountains as Lance Olfred and the stone knight carrying me followed shortly after.

We landed in a small clearing on the edge of the Grand Mountains facing the Beast Glades. I was still chained together so I sat leaning against a tree, watching Olfred erect a campsite out of the earth.

“Hold still, Arthur Leywin.” Without waiting for me to respond, the female lance clamped an artifact over my sternum. Instantly, I felt mana drain out of my core as the device sunk deeper into my skin.

“Ugh. My magic won’t help me escape from you guys, so why the sudden precaution?” I asked through gritted teeth. The sensation of your mana being forcibly contained wasn’t a pleasant feeling.

“There are other ways you can make trouble,” she replied tersely before taking the sleeping Sylvie and retreated into one of the stone huts that Olfred had conjured.

“How could I even...” I muttered under my breath, annoyed.

“It’s because we’re so close to the Beast Glades.” I turned my head towards Olfred, who took a seat on the ground next to me as he let out a sigh.

“You guys are the Lances, though. Are you saying that there are mana beasts that even you guys aren’t capable of beating?” I asked, a little taken aback by his approach.

“I haven’t met one so far, but the Beast Glades hold many mysteries that even the Lances have to be wary of, especially at night, when the more powerful beasts roam. Despite our powers, boy, we’re still mortals; death never looms far from us. With all of the strange events coming happening these days, one can never be too careful.” There was a brief silence that was only accompanied by the low howling winds.

“What am I doing, telling all of this to a little kid,” he sighed.

I just shook my head. “Probably because you’ve been stuck with miserable company for the past few days.”

I was surprised when the old lance erupted into a fit of laughter. “You’re right about that, boy. Let me tell you, spending time with Varay and Barion together is more stress-inducing than any SS-class mana beast I’ve ever fought.”

Varay. So that was the female lance’s name.

“Let me ask you this, boy. I’m curious as to how you became such a capable mage at your young age.”

“How do you know I’m capable? You’ve never seen me fight,” I challenged.

“I’ve heard Bairon tell me about his younger brother, the one you killed. I’d also gathered stories from the students while helping some of them just now too,” he answered, a curious look depicted on his aged face as he studied me.

We spent a bit more time talking to each other, but, while Olfred seemed amiable, he was also very guarded. I wasn’t able to pry out any sort of information from him except those that I could find out on my own. He conversed professionally without revealing anything crucial, as did I. In spite of our little dance of social intricacy in the form of polite conversation, there was a subtle tension between us as he weaved my questions into jokes. We tiptoed around each other with our light words as we tried to, at least, procure hints to satisfy our curiosity. After an hour of fruitless effort on both sides, Olfred suggested I get some sleep.

As expected of the Lances; while Olfred wasn’t as outright distant as the others, he was, in a way, more mysterious.

Olfred hadn’t been so kind as to make me a stone hut as he did for himself and Varay. Without a shelter and the protection of mana, the sharp winds sent chills throughout

my body, making myself as small as possible as I lay curled against the tree.

I must've fallen asleep at some point because I was rudely awakened as a stone knight picked me up like a sack of rice.

"Hi, best friend," I patted the conjured golem indifferently as I was whisked away back into the air.

'Sylv, how are you holding up?' I asked my bond.

'I'm okay, Papa. It feels a little stuffy in here though, but it's comfortable,' Sylv replied.

Her emotions were linked with mine so I was careful in making sure not to leak any of the worry that I was feeling to her by accident. I wasn't so much worried about what the Council would do to me; it was my Asura bond that I was worried about.

As we flew over the Beast Glades, I realized just how big our continent was. The diverse terrain of the mana beasts never ended. We passed through deserts, grasslands, snow-capped mountains and rocky canyons. It wasn't once or twice that I spotted a mana beast large enough to be seen clearly from where we were flying.

Olfred and Varay constantly released a surge of killing intent, warding off all of the mana beasts within our vicinity. Still, there were more than a few times where we took a detour while the two lances withdrew their auras.

I couldn't help but think that Varay had put the mana restriction artifact on me so that I don't purposely attract the attention of dangerous and territorial mana beasts. I had to commend her, as that was something I would probably do to get away. I was curious, though, whether I had the ability to survive this deep in the Beast Glades or not.

My internal debate didn't last long as Varay suddenly stopped. She took out the communication scroll that she had used to read the Council's sentencing before carefully looking around.

"We are here," she said.

I looked around in the sky but it was blatantly obvious that the only thing around us were the birds dumb enough to venture close to flying humans.

Just as I was about to speak my mind, Varay held up her hand as if she was searching

for something in the air. With a soft click, the sky split apart to reveal a metal staircase.

Olfred let out a smirk upon seeing my gaping mouth.

“Welcome to the Council’s floating castle.”

Chapter 99

Fellow Captive

My eyes stayed fixed on the iron staircase aged with dents and rust, until the roar of mana beasts below shook me from my daze.

“Looks like some of the more keen mana beasts have sensed the castle. We should hurry if we don’t want any unnecessary trouble,” Olfred voiced out to no one in particular.

Peering down from the sky, we could faintly make out the subtle movements of a few huge mana beasts that were shrouded in the dense cluster of trees.

“Mm,” replied Varay, neither agreeing nor disagreeing but simply accepting his point.

The stone knight, that had me slung over its shoulder, gently lowered me onto the base of the flight of stairs before crumbling into sand and reconstructing itself into a cape as it fastened itself around Olfred’s shoulder.

“We dwarves always carry a bit of dirt with us wherever we go,” Olfred winked at me upon noticing my surprised expression.

The door closed behind us, and while I thought we would be surrounded by darkness, a moss-like substance covering the walls began glowing with a soft, blue light.

Varay dissipated the ice cuffs that shackled my legs together so I could walk on my own and took the lead while Olfred followed closely behind us. We must’ve trudged on for at least an hour up the seemingly endless flight of stairs when I voiced out my frustration.

“Is there no faster way to go up than climbing this absurd amount of stairs?” I sighed. My body might be stronger than most humans even without my mana core due to the assimilation process I had gone through, but I was still growing impatient at the wasted time.

“Magic cannot be used at all of the entrances,” Varay answered immediately, a hint of

impatience in her already cold voice.

I let out another deep breath and trudged along silently. Stealing a glance at my bond, as expected, Sylvie was sleeping a lot more than usual due to her recent transformation to her draconic form. Windsom had explained to me about the different forms that Asuras could utilize depending on the situation, but I never knew how much of a toll it took on Sylvie to release her draconic form. It couldn't be helped, however, since Sylvie was basically a newborn in the eyes of deities who could live for what I can only imagine to be thousands of years, if not more.

Lost in my thoughts, I hadn't realized that Varay had stopped.

"Oof," I let out a surprised grunt as I bumped into her. The female lance was just a tad taller than me but I was a step below her so my face had only hit her back. However, my arms were cuffed in front of me and they had hit someplace a bit more... intimate.

I hadn't thought much of it, but to my surprise, Varay reacted in a way I would not have expected. She let out a rather effeminate little squeal as she jumped forward. Whipping around to face me, I could see her face flash in embarrassment and surprise before immediately contorting into a fearsome glare that could drench someone in cold sweat.

Collecting herself, she turned back around and placed her hand at the end of the stairwell before muttering softly, "We are here."

Gazing behind me, Olfred just gave an amused smirk before shrugging his shoulders and nudging me forward.

A glaring light seeped through the crevice of the wall that had split apart. As my eyes adjusted, I could finally make out what was ahead. A brightly lit corridor with an arched ceiling stretched from where we were, walls covered with mysterious designs carved onto every visible facet and corner. The engraved runes made the corridor seem more like a memorial etched with names of the deceased than a luxurious decoration; each engraving and design seemed to hold a purpose and meaning. There were simple chandeliers hung from the ceiling every few meters apart, but while the hall was brightly lit, The white light gave off a cold, emotionless feel, reminding me of the hospitals back in my old world.

"Now that we're inside the actual castle itself, it is best not to converse with us or any

of the lances,” he whispered with an unusual chill to his voice as we entered through the rather crudely-made door

We walked in silence, with only the echoes of our footsteps filling the hall. On either side were doors that didn’t match the metallic corridor; there were doors of different colors and material, all quite distinct from one another. The corridor didn’t seem to have an end, but luckily, Varay stopped us at a seemingly random door to our left along the way. She knocked on the door without pause until it swung inward, revealing an armored bear of a man.

I took a closer look at him.

“My Lords,” the guard immediately knelt down with his head bowed.

“Rise,” Varay replied coolly. The guard stood back up, but did not make eye contact with either of the two lances. Instead, his gaze was fixed on me as he regarded me both curiously and cautiously.

“Tell the Council of our arrival.” Olfred waved the guard away impatiently. The armored man took another quick bow and disappeared behind a hidden black door that looked to be a part of the wall.

After a few minutes, the guard came back out and fully opened the door for us, allowing us in. “Lance Zero and Lance Balrog have been given permission to meet the Council, along with the prisoner named Arthur Leywin.”

I looked at Olfred, raising a brow. As he walked past me, he muttered, “Bah. Code names,” as if embarrassed.

I couldn’t help but let out a wry smile before trailing behind the two lances. Whatever awaited ahead would most likely determine my future, but all I could think of was what the code names for all the other lances were.

As I passed the guard and stepped through the hidden door, I could immediately sense the change in the atmosphere. We were in a large circular room with a high-rise ceiling that seemed to be made entirely of glass. The room was simply decorated, with only a long, rectangular table at the very back. Six chairs, each seated with one of the members of the Council, were facing the three of us as they looked at me, every one of them with different expressions.

““Your Majesties.”” Olfred and Varay both bowed towards the Council as the kings and queens rose from their seats. Not knowing what exactly the custom dictated in situations like this, I followed after the two lances and bowed as well.

“Ignorant! Do you think of yourself on the same level as the Lances? You should take a knee at the very least as a sign of respect,” a husky voice boomed. I looked up to see that it was the dwarf king, Dawsid Greysunders.

He sported a bushy brown beard that spilled from his chin and covered his upper torso. He had a barrel of a chest covered by an adorned leather armor that seemed like it was restraining his muscles rather than protecting them. However, looking at his soft, uncalled hand twiddling the gold wine flute, I had second thoughts as to whether those muscles were ever put to use, or if they were simply just for show.

I had a hard time controlling my face as it contorted into a look of annoyance, but before I could rebut back, I caught sight of Alduin Eralith, Tessia’s father and the elf king. He gave me a quick shake of the head, with a worried expression on his face.

Clenching my jaw, I relented. “My apologies, Your Majesties. I am but a boy from the countryside, uneducated in the ways of proper manners,” I said through gritted teeth, taking a knee.

“Hmph.” He plopped back down on his seat, crossing his arms. Even as he sunk back into his chair, it was impossible to ignore the sturdy frame that the dwarf king had. The veins on his arms stretched with every little movement. Paired with a great bristling beard and dark, heavy eyes, Even as a dwarf, he looked much larger than he really was.

“Now, now. I’m sure the journey had been long and everyone’s eager to get started. Varay, uncuff Arthur.” Curtis’ father, Blaine Glayder was the one that had just spoken. The female lance dissipated the frozen cuffs that bound my wrists but let the slumbering Sylvie inside the frozen orb, as I surveyed the rulers of this continent. It had been years since I last saw Blaine and Priscilla Glayder, but besides the few extra wrinkles, little had changed about them. I noticed that the queen did look a bit fatigued, but her expression did not give that away at all.

It was the first time seeing the dwarf queen but she was just as I had expected—manly. She had a defined, square jaw with sharp eyes and dark hair pulled straight back into a ponytail. Her broad shoulders strained the fabric of her simple, brown blouse as she

stayed seated upright on her chair.

Alduin and Merial Eralith, however, seemed to have aged the most. While it had merely been days since I had last seen them, I wasn't surprised, since their only daughter had been the center of Draneeve's act of terrorism.

The two lances that had escorted me here took a few steps back from me as I looked up at the Council.

Alduin Eralith spoke up with in a gentle tone, his expression coming off as almost guilty for bringing me here. "Arthur Leywin. Before we begin, I would like to thank you, not as a leader but as a father for saving my daughter—"

"And need I remind you that we are here as leaders of this damned continent, not fathers?" Dawsid interjected, pounding his fists on the table. "This boy mutilated one of his fellow schoolmates before killing him. Shall I read the description one of the scouts so kindly sent to us?"

Priscilla shook her head, trying to quell the situation.

"Dawsid, I hardly think it's necessary—"

"Both legs, crushed into mush past the mid-thigh. Left arm, dismember and cauterized past the elbow. Right arm, frozen and crushed. Genitals..." As the dwarf king continued to read off of the scroll, even he seemed to have a hard time saying what was coming up next. "Genitals, along with the pelvic bone, crushed and—"

"I think that's enough, Dawsid," Alduin warned.

"It seems I've made my point. Yes, it's all convenient and everything that this boy happened to save the entire school, but it did not justify the torment he put his schoolmate through. To me, I can only see this as him using this whole fiasco as an excuse to get revenge on someone who he's clearly had enmity with since the past," Dawsid said coldly.

"You can't be saying that this boy's main motive for delving blindly into such a dangerous scene was just to seek revenge. And even if he did, what of it. You can't prove to anyone here what Arthur's motives were. He did what we couldn't do in times of need and that was potentially save every student inside Xyrus," Alduin barked back, his face turning more and more red.

“Yes, and that is why I’m not suggesting we kill the boy. We just need to merely cripple him as a mage.” It was the dwarf queen that spoke this time. The cold indifference in her voice seemed to even make her husband falter for a moment.

“What my wife, Glaudera said, is exactly my thoughts as well. This boy is too dangerous if left alone. Imagine if he and his pet dragon decides to make enemies out of us...”

My ears perked up at the mention of Sylvie.

“My God, do you hear yourself? You sound like a paranoid criminal. Blaine, Priscilla, what do you have to add to all of this?” Tessia’s mother, asked, shaking her head, disconcerted.

“Merial, my husband and I both agree with you on this, speaking as a parent,” Priscilla said evenly, her distant gaze switching back and forth from Sylvie and I. “But, it is best to consider the Greysunders’ view as well. What they say, they say with the entirety of the continent at stake.”

“So what, we cripple the boy and kill the dragon, all for the off chance that the boy might harbor ill feelings toward us and decide to get revenge?” Alduin nearly yelled as he stood up, facing the other leaders.

“Alduin, know your place! Don’t think you are on the same level as us just because you sit here. May I remind you of your inability to even take care of your own lances?” Dawsid growled menacingly as he pointed accusingly at the elf king, “This continent is potentially at the brink of war and you were careless enough to lose one of our biggest trump cards!”

“Your Majesties. Was I brought here to simply hear my judgment or am I allowed to—”

“You will not speak until you are instructed to!” Dawsid roared, cutting me off. “I refuse to any claims this boy is trying to make. He could say that the God of Iron himself spoke to him and ordered him to do all of this but it does not change what he had done and what he will be able to do if left alone. The scouts are still in the middle of gathering accounts from the witnesses.”

“I see no point in me being here if I am not even allowed to speak and give my account on what happened and why it happened the way it did,” I did my best to control the volume and tone of my voice, but I could tell it was coming out a lot sharper than I had

wanted it to.

“You’re right! There is no need for this prisoner to be here. Olfred, lock him up in one of the lower cells and keep him there until further orders. Also, lock his pet in a vault.” Glaudera Greysunders responded for her husband, waving her hand toward us.

“Dawsid, Glaudera, the Council is not for you to run and order as you see fit. Aya!” Alduin growled. Behind him, a figure masked in the shadows kneeled, awaiting a command.

“Stand down, elf! Remember that you only have one lance at your disposal.” There was heavy tension as the elf king and dwarf king locked eyes.

Alduin was the one to concede as he reluctantly sat back in his chair. For a brief moment as I was picked up by Olfred’s stone knight, our gazes met. I could see the unrelenting determination in his gaze as he gave me a firm nod. I bit my tongue and chose to stay silent.

It was obvious that the dwarf king and queen were all for crippling me, while the Glayder’s remained neutral since much is still unknown. I was going to have to rely on Alduin and Merial if Sylvie and I were going to get home unscathed.

As the stone knight carried me through a different door and down a flight of stairs, I tried to talk to Olfred with little results.

Taking a look around, it seemed like your typical castle dungeon where prisoners of war and traitors were held. I was in just one of the many cells, but much of the area was covered by shadows that the light of the few burning torches couldn’t reach.

“This will be your cell, Arthur. Your bond will be placed elsewhere.” The summoned knight carrying me suddenly crumbled into dust upon reaching my dungeon chamber. I landed rather unimpressively on my knees and elbows as Olfred shut the metal cage.

“Ouch, he could’ve warned me,” I muttered aloud, brushing the dust off of my knees.

“That voice. A-Arthur? Arthur Leywin?”

My head bolted up at the sound of the feeble, yet familiar sound.

“Director Goodsky?”

Chapter 100

Intentions

“Director Goodsky?” I sputtered incredulously.

“Y-yes. Although, ‘director’ doesn’t seem to be appropriate anymore seeing as how I was stripped of that title. Who would’ve imagined I’d meet you in here, Arthur,” she replied weakly, and by the audible pant in her speech, it seemed as if she had suffered considerably.

“Stripped of your title? I don’t understand. What is going on here? Why are you here, Director?” I leaned against the metal bars of my cage in hopes to hear her more clearly. From the source of her voice, I deduced that her cell was diagonally opposite my own, but because of the way the torchlights were set up, most of the cells were still in darkness.

“We will get to that later. Arthur, how did you end up being locked up? With your ability, I assumed you would be able to fend well enough for yourself or at least escape if necessary.” There was a hint of despair in Cynthia’s voice as she asked me.

“Tessia was held captive by Lucas and I had to use most of my mana to fight him. When two of the lances appeared, I didn’t have enough strength to escape,” I sighed.

“I... I apologize, I don’t quite follow. The half-elf boy, Lucas?”

It was obvious that Director Goodsky wasn’t aware at all of the recent happenings at her own academy, which I found unsurprising since she would’ve surely been there to help if she had known. I filled her in as detailed as I could in the quiet of the dungeon, only being able to assume that her silence was indication that she was fervently listening.

It was hard to tell whether the other cells had prisoners inside as well, but the information I was revealing wasn’t exactly confidential so I caught Goodsky up until the events of what had just happened with the Council.

“Can you describe for me how exactly the boy, Lucas, seemed to you when you fought

against him?" Goodsky asked.

"Apart from the massive increase in his mana manipulation capabilities, I noticed that his physical appearance was different as well. Let's see, he had this sickly, gray skin tone as well as dark lines, which I assumed to be his veins, running down his face, neck and arms. His hair color had changed too; it wasn't blond like I remembered it to be, but it was more of a dusty black and white color. The Wykes family had always been known to have a keen fondness of elixirs, no matter what the side effects may have been—"

"No elixir on this continent has the capabilities to enhance the user's mana core that drastically Arthur. And, you weren't able to catch a glimpse of what the leader of this whole disaster looked like?" Director Goodsky interrupted, her voice edged with frustration.

"Unfortunately, I didn't arrive in time to see him. Why?"

"I just wanted to confirm some things, but I think I already have a basic understanding of the whole situation. I knew it was bound to happen, but not this soon. They're moving forward with the plan much too quickly." I could hear the director's footsteps echoing as she paced inside her cell.

"What do you mean you knew it was bound to happen? Who are 'they'? Director Goodsky, I'm beginning to have a nagging suspicion that I truly hope I could denounce as simply my lack of judgement..."

There was a brief pause from both of us where only the flickering snaps of the torches' flames broke the still silence of the dungeon.

"I cannot say, Arthur. I am bound by forces beyond anything either one of us can hope to go against. I am truly sorry."

"A binding? Huh, I see. How convenient. And is there a way to remove this binding?" I asked in response, sounding more sardonic than I had meant to.

"I have searched for decades on this matter, and all were futile," Director Goodsky let out a deep breath, ignoring my tone.

"Then the reason you are locked up here is because..."

“From what you have told me and based on what I already know, it seems I have been made a scapegoat that the Council wishes to utilize as a convenient excuse for all that has happened recently.”

“Why would the Council need a scapegoat?”

“I cannot say the reason for this as well,” she replied. There was clear frustration in her tone, but not directed at me, but rather at herself. “Arthur, it is painful for me to continue talking about this. Even the very thought of mentioning what I know to someone activates the curse. We should both get some rest; heaven knows we’ll be needing it.”

Letting out a sigh, I stepped away from the metal gate and leaned my back against the rigid, stone wall of my cell. Even without the artifact binding my mana core, I was still unable to use any sort of magic here.

With nothing else to do, my mind began racing with different thoughts.

We were inside of a floating castle located above one of the deepest ends of the Beast Glades. Assuming that I could escape with Sylvie and Director Goodsky, would we even be able to make it out of the Beast Glades alive? Sylvie was out of the question since her recent transformation had left her in a state only slightly better than a hibernating bear. Goodsky was a silver core wind mage, which might be enough for us to fly back.

I backtracked my plan after realizing the three of us would still probably get wiped out. On our way here, the two lances had to constantly release a strong killing intent to ward off any beast. Even then, they were cautious enough to hide all of our presences at times. It would be near suicidal to think we can simply fly over the entire Beast Glades.

After what seemed like hours of deliberation, I could only click my tongue in frustration and roll over on the cold floor to try and get some sleep. It was impossible after all. It was becoming harder and harder to push down the sensation of hopelessness creeping up the more I continued to plan for our escape.

BLAINE GLAYDER’S POV:

“What the hell was that, Glayder? I thought we had an agreement?” the former dwarf

king barked out after slamming the door of my study.

“Yes. I am well aware what the agreement is. Rest assured, you will have my, and my wife’s, vote, Dawsid. However, even you cannot make me spout out such irrational accusations at the boy who had just saved the entire future generation of this continent, including my children,” I responded icily, pouring myself a glass of aged liquor.

“And, I’m saying that there will be no future generation if you do not side with me! Arthur and his bond has to go. That was the agreement. They have to be brought back to Him if we’re going to even have a future in this continent.”

“I know what the stakes are, Dawsid. I do not need you badgering me every moment you feel insecure. What you and I are doing is betraying the entire population, you realize that, yes?” I hissed, staring at the dwarf who wasn’t much taller than I was even when I was seated.

“It’s not considered betraying if this continent was already bound for annihilation. Blaine, you and I both know what is going to happen to Dicathen, regardless of whether we try to save it or not. We have to look beyond that and try to salvage what’s important to us,” he consoled, his hands gestured in a placating manner.

“If that’s what you tell yourself to sleep at night, go ahead. What we’re doing is abandoning our people so that we can save our own asses,” I scoffed, shaking my head.

“That is what I tell myself! What He promised isn’t a bad deal! Your family will all live and serve Him just like my family will.”

“And what of our people, Dawsid? What will He do with the citizens of Dicathen? If even the Kingdom of Sapin and Darv aren’t safe after we promised allegiance to Him, what will happen to the Kingdom of Elenoir?”

“Bah! The elves have always been too old-fashioned and righteous for their own good. That old geezer, Virion, would never allow Alduin to side with Him. It’s a shame too, but, unlike us, the elves won’t realize what being a leader truly means. Just imagine, Blaine, the technology, the riches that He and his people will bring to Dicathen! Immortality, unrivaled martial strength, and infinite wealth will no longer be just a fantasy for us, but be only a matter of time!”

“Mind your words. I am following Him because of my family. Do not lump me together

with the likes of you, who is abandoning your own race for the sake of personal gain. I'm sure you can imagine what He will most likely do once he arrives. What will become of the rest of the three races? Most likely either a genocide of some form, or if he's smart, he'll make them all his slaves."

The former dwarf king was rendered speechless by my response; his mouth moved as if he was trying to refute my argument, but no audible words came out.

"Nevertheless, my wife's love for our children seems to heavily outweigh that of the entire human kingdom, and my duty to preserve the Glayder blood will always triumph, so rest assured, we will side with you. Hopefully, my ancestors will forgive my actions as this will be the only way to save the Glayder line," I sighed in defeat.

Dawsid lifted his hand up, about to pat my shoulder when I gave him a sharp look. Feigning a dry cough, he excused himself, leaving me to my own dark thoughts in the silence of my study. Staring blankly at the extravagantly decorated room, furnished with rare wood carved by master carpenters, embellished with rare gems and metals worth more than a small town, a sense of dread and guilt began surfacing in my stomach.

These luxuries meant nothing to me. All my life, what I wanted was to be the strongest mage to make my father and my ancestors proud. Yet, it was blatantly obvious that my talent as a mage was subpar compared to even countryside peasants. Only through spending an enormous amount of resources on mana strengthening elixirs and aids was I able to barely break into the red stage. Even towards my own wife and children, I caught myself harboring feelings of scathing envy.

I had always been ashamed by this but there was little else I could do. Even having control over the two lances did not help my feelings of inferiority, instead, it was a daily reminder for me that in order to properly rule over my own people, I needed to be guarded at all times because I wasn't strong enough to fend for myself.

Was I truly making this decision for the safety of my family and myself, or, like Dawsid, hungered and yearned for power incomparable to other mages? The safety of my loved ones is what made me take action, but the more I dwelled on it, the more I was growing excited at the prospect of gaining strength, being at the pinnacle of where my people would fear and respect me solely because of my strength, and not due to the protection the lances I had in my control. My true motives and intentions have become more and more blurry the more I thought upon it.

After an hour of contemplating, I realized in my inebriated state that no amount of alcohol could wash this miserable feeling away. I stumbled over my own feet and toppled onto the ground. Losing my grip on the glass I was holding onto as I fell, it shattered on the floor ahead of me; the shards embedded themselves into the arm I used to break my fall with. I could only curse in frustration at my own inability. How pathetic was I, stumbling and being cut by mere glass. Had I been born more talented, more powerful...

I picked myself up, ignoring the bloodstains on the ground, leaving the shards of glass in my bleeding arm while staggering to my bedroom. I could smell the stench of liquor in my breath as I let out a deep breath.

Memories of when I had first met the boy flashed in my mind as I trudged towards the door that now seemed so far away. Even before my children started speaking of Arthur from school, he had left a deep impression, enough for me to see him as a figure of great importance in the future. Perhaps the only thing greater than his strengths as a mage was his poor luck in being involved in this conspiracy.

"I'm sorry, boy..." I mumbled under my breath. "I would like to believe that it is for the good of this continent that you become a sacrifice." Even as I said this, the words sounded empty to my ears. I had hoped saying it aloud would provide some sort of self-assurance, but what I felt for Arthur wasn't grief or sympathy.

Stronger than the feelings of a king sacrificing for the greater good...

Even stronger than the weight of a Glayder trying to keep his bloodline alive...

I felt this soothing sensation of my dark envy being resolved with the death of this boy. I loathed myself for this, but what of it? I am Blaine Glayder, fourth of his name, yet my talents as a mage don't even amount to a single drop compared to the ocean that is Arthur Leywin. Why should that boy of no origins carry a power that is better fit for me?

I unlocked the door and wobbled unsteadily, denying the maids rushing to help me.

"I'm sorry, boy," I mumbled again. "It is for the greater good..."

"For my greater good."

Chapter 101

Visitors

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

The silhouette of an enormous castle shrouded in darkness continued growing larger but whether I was approaching the castle or the castle was moving towards me, I had no idea. As the silhouette grew closer, I was gradually able to make out the details of the castle: the fluttering house flag resting on the top of the highest tower, the splendid fountain carved with intricate features, the high gates with sharp spikes and barbed wire.

Little by little, the shadows covering the castle receded, exposing more of the castle's exterior. I could see the image of a flaming phoenix on the house flag and crows gathering atop the gate. However, a horrendous feeling began creeping up my back, the closer I drew. I arrived below the towering gates and locked eyes with a particularly grotesque crow. It regarded me for a few seconds but then let out a caw and resumed its feast.

What was it eating?

I couldn't see from the bottom of the gate, but for some reason, I felt a need to know what the ravens were eating.

This unrelenting urge to find out...

I began climbing up the gate, ignoring the spikes from the barbed wire digging into my hands. The higher I climbed, the more crows gathered atop the gate, joining in on the festivities. At some point, I became shrouded in crow feathers so much that I could only see black. I roared out for them to disappear, but no sound came out. Despite the inaudible shriek, the flock dispersed, revealing what they had been so eagerly consuming.

It was the decapitated heads of Tessia and my family impaled on black spikes. There were chunks of flesh missing from their face. Without their eyelids, their milky eyes seemed to stare distantly as their lip-less mouth hung open.

As I reached for them, to remove them from the spikes their heads were skewered on, all of their gaze suddenly focused on me and they screamed at me, revealing the insects that had burrowed themselves inside of their mouths.

“ALL YOUR FAULT!” The sudden volume of their voices made me lose my grip on the gate and I was sent falling down as their lifeless eyes continued to stare at me.

I bolted up from the stone ground I had been lying on. Cold sweat had already drenched my clothes as I sat there heaving for breath.

It was just a dream.....

I stared down at my hands to find out that they were trembling. As I tried to control my breathing, an unfamiliar voice startled me to my feet.

I whipped my body towards the sound, only to be staring at a darkened figure in the corner of my cell.

As she stepped out towards me, I was able to see who she was.

“Hi, there,” the woman said coaxingly, except her mouth wasn’t moving. Her voice had a soothing timbre that tickled my ear.

It dawned on me that the woman who had just spoken was Alduin’s remaining lance. I had caught a glimpse of her earlier today, except, just like before, she was covered in a cloak that hid her appearance.

What surprised me more was the fact that despite how close she was to me, I wasn’t able to sense her presence at all. It reminded me of when Virion released his second stage of his beast form, except, it seemed as natural as breathing for her.

“Do not talk. I bring you a message from King Eralith,” she whispered from underneath her cloak, leaning close to me as she handed me a piece of paper.

I read through it as soon as the letter was in my hand.

Dear Arthur,

While explanations and apologies for the recent events concerning the disaster at Xyrus Academy are in order, I fear the scale of this incident is much deeper and more

sinister than what it appears to be on the surface.

You do not have much time. Come a few hours, the Council will deem you and Cynthia Goodsky as the perpetrators of the act of terrorism that had befallen on Xyrus. Director Goodsky will be sentenced to public execution, but you and your bond will only be imprisoned. I'm sorry I could not help you much in this matter; my voice simply cannot win against the unified front of the dwarves and humans.

What I'm about to tell you next is something that was not meant for my ears. I have yet to find all of the missing pieces, but what I did hear between King Glayder and Dawsid, was that they are planning on delivering you to someone. I do not know who, but it seems to be the only reason why they're keeping you alive and intact. I have already sent my father, along with a few escorts, to take your family to a hidden location where they'll be safe from those who wish to do your family harm or use them against you. Think of it as a small compensation for all that you've done for Tessia. I hope this, at least, gives you some ease of heart. Even if my lance can free you from your cell, once you step outside, all of the other lances will be notified. My apologies as this is all I can do for you for now. Stay strong and be firm.

Alduin Eralith

As soon as I folded the letter, it crumbled into ashes between my fingers. Looking back up, the female lance named Aya, that I had expected to see, was no longer there, disappearing as quietly as she had appeared.

I had to admit that there was a heavy burden that had been lifted from my chest. The safety of my family had been a concern for me the entire time. Due to the information passed on from Windsom, the Council's behaviour since our first meeting made me question the possibility of the Vritra playing a part in all of this. However, now that the Council had decided on the public execution of Director Goodsky, I was almost certain that the Vritra were involved.

I had originally suspected the Wykes house being involved by somehow tilting the odds against my favor for killing Lucas; they were a family of high wealth and influence after all. But the Wykes family has no reason for involving the Director of Xyrus Academy. Even if Goodsky wasn't from an influential family, her name alone bears weight all over the continent. The Wykes family alone wouldn't be able to influence the Council enough to make them do something so rash like condemning her to public execution. Even if pushing the blame on Goodsky would ease some of the burden the Council would face from the public, her death wouldn't be worth it...

Unless there was a third party involved calling the shots, either bribing or forcing the Council.

Letting out another deep breath as I sat down, thoughts of how I had refused to grow attached to anyone in my past life because I didn't want any weaknesses came to mind. Shaking my head to try and disperse the thoughts, I leaned my back against the cold wall, thinking and coming up with a plan.



"Get up!" a sharp baritone voice snapped.

My eyes fluttered open at the abrupt bellow and clanging of the metal gate.

Rolling to my stomach, I push myself up, stretching the aching bones in my body from sleeping on the hard, stone ground.

I expected to see Olfred since he was the one that had brought me to the cell, but instead, I had the unfortunate pleasure of waking up to Bairon's happy face; and by happy, I meant a scowl of impatience laced with a hatred for my very existence basically written on his face. I don't blame him, since I had been the one to kill his younger brother, but I sensed, for some reason, that his death wasn't the only reason for his blatant animosity.

"The Council is waiting," Bairon spoke sharply, opening the gate. The lance grabbed my arm roughly and half dragged me out of my cell after binding my arms and attaching the sealing artifact back on my chest.

"Good morning to you as well. I see you're not much of a morning person," I chuckled, trying to keep myself from falling as he continued jerking my arm.

The lance said nothing in response, though his cold glare spoke volumes. As we made our way towards the exit, I noticed that the cell Director Goodsky had been held in was open.

We arrived in front of a different room from yesterday; the large double doors that towered high enough to admit giants were closed shut, with muffled sounds coming from the other side.

“You don’t know how much I’m looking forward to the trial,” Bairon said, his jaws tensing, while his grip on my arm became even tighter.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be sure to treat your family with the same sentiments you showed mine.” The lance turned to me, his lips curling upwards in a smirk, just enough to reveal his sharp canine.

Had I not received the letter earlier last night, I might’ve actually been worried, but knowing they were safely hidden and that for now the Council needed me alive and intact, his empty threats didn’t mean much.

“Are you honestly trying to pick a fight with a thirteen-year-old?” I shook my head, using my best expression of disappointment.

A sharp tug lifted me from the ground and suddenly, I was face to face with Bairon. “I don’t think you understand what’s about to happen to you right now. You’re going to either end up dead or wishing you had died while your pet is going to become a prized pet for one of the kings. You think this only affects you? I’ll make sure your family and anyone you even remotely cared about faces a miserable death.” he spat out as my legs dangled above the ground.

“Yes yes, the great Lance Bairon is going to take vengeance for his lunatic younger brother, who chose to go to the dark side and kill innocent students, by tormenting the teenager who put him out of his misery and killing his family too. All hail Lance Bairon!” I tried acting surprised, but I suspected my monotonous voice gave it away

I could see his right hand ball up into a fist, but he just clicked his tongue in disgust, tossing me back onto the floor with enough force to send me rolling towards the tall double doors. Dusting myself off as best as I could with my arms tied in front of me, I remained seated, leaning my head back on the doors as I gave Bairon a wink.

Either Bairon didn’t see or he chose to ignore me, but as I was about to say something, I heard faint sounds coming from the other side of the doors. After assimilating with Sylvia’s dragon will, my entire body had been strengthened, including my senses and reflexes. It wasn’t to the point where I would be able to last a few minutes against a lance without magic, but my hearing was strong enough to vaguely make out some familiar voices inside the protected room.

“...perpetrator of...”

“...refusal to answer...”

It seemed like the Council was about done with the sentencing for who I could safely assume to be Director Goodsky.

“...sentenced to public execution.”

The last statement rang particularly loud from Dawsid’s booming voice.

After a moment of silence, the tall doors I was leaning against suddenly swung inward without a creak, causing me to tip backwards. Looking up from the floor, I spotted the same guard, who had admitted Varay, Olfred and I during the first Council meeting, regarding us without any emotion.

“The Council is ready,” the guard said, shifting his gaze from me to Bairon.

Picking myself up, I was able to lock eyes with the former director of Xyrus Academy as she was escorted back out by two guards.

Her gaze was firm but her jaws were tensed in suppressed anger as she passed me by.

Keeping my expression deadpan and unreadable as I trudged towards the Council, I studied each of their faces.

Sitting down on the single chair, wordlessly, I waited for them to start. Bairon appeared behind Blaine Glayder and as the double doors shut with a loud thud, the room was filled with an eerie silence. The Dwarf King was the first to speak, his eyes glued to the stack of papers he had begun shuffling through.

“Boy, let it be known that the Council is merciful. Even though your heinous actions against a fellow schoolmate would normally result in at least the incapacitation of your mana core, we agreed that since your actions were for the sake of the greater good, your sentencing will instead be as followed: Arthur Leywin is to be stripped of his previous title as a mage all and the benefits that come with. He is also to be imprisoned until further notice.” Dawsid spoke in a grandiose manner, as if he actually thought of himself as benevolent.

There was a brief silence; I suspected the Dwarf King was waiting for me to shower him with gratitude and other forms of flattery before he spoke again.

“Is there anything you would like to say?” he questioned.

“Just a few questions... Your Majesty. While my first punishment is apparent enough, what do you mean by imprisoned until ‘further notice’?” I tilted my head.

“Upon the next few weeks, we’ll be monitoring how the disaster at Xyrus Academy is faring with the victims and their families. As soon as we see that enough time has passed and the memories of your actions have more or less dissipated from the public’s minds, we will release you. Think of it as a sort of provisional detainment instead of imprisonment,” Blaine explained, mustering up a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“I see. Fair enough, I suppose. What of my bond?” I asked. As soon as I was released from my cell this morning by Bairon, I had tried communicating with Sylvie, only to be met by silence.

“The Council is already being kind enough to let you live, yet you ask for more?” Glaundera snapped, banging her thick palm on the raised desk.

“Keeping your bond is another issue, Arthur. Part of the sentencing where you lose your rights as a mage means that you will no longer be able to keep your bond.” Alduin had been the one to tell me this. Had it been anyone else, I would’ve reacted differently, but reading the subtle meanings in his intonations and words, I knew he was only trying to keep me from trouble...

As our eyes stayed locked for a few more seconds, I forced a stiff nod.

“I understand, Your Majesties.”

“Good. Bairon, take him back to his cell but keep him chained up,” Blaine waved us away. I studied the expressions of everyone there one last time. While Blaine’s face was more self-assured than yesterday’s trial, his wife still looked pale with guilt. The dwarves were both haughtily arrogant, making me more certain that they were the ones most involved with the Vritra while the Alduin and Merial both wore stoic expressions as masks.

I could tell Bairon was furious but he stayed silent throughout the trip back to my cell. I decided it was best not to antagonize him in his current state so I remained mute as well.

I had expected to be taken to the same cell I was in before, but I was instead brought down to a different holding place. With an actual bed and toilet, I would've mistaken it for a room if it weren't for the bars that kept me from escaping.

After tossing me inside with a bit more strength than necessary, the lance left wordlessly. My arms were still chained together in front of me while the artifact stayed embedded into my chest, limiting my abilities.

I couldn't tell how many hours had passed or whether it was night or day since there weren't any windows, but as I sat there patiently, the sound of soft footsteps approached.

"It seems you were expecting me," the voice sighed.

My lips curled upwards as I gazed upon a strikingly familiar face.

"About damn time, Windsom."

Chapter 102

Chess Pieces

DAWSID GREYSUNDER'S POV:

“Hehe... hehehe,” I pursed my lips, trying to contain the laughter building up inside me.

“Cheers, My Love, for the madness that will soon be coming to an end.” I held up my goblet as I leaned forward.

“Cheers.” My wife smiled back, touching my glass with hers to make a hollow ‘clink’.

Leaning back in the leather armchair much too big for myself, I relished the dry taste of fermented fruits that cost me about as much as a small house. Admiring the extravagant rings on each of my fingers, sparkling against the candlelight, I couldn’t help but smile widely.

“Just think, Glaundera. After this, no longer will our people be stuck in holes at the bottom of this continent. With His new rule, we, along with our people, will be there to serve directly beneath him. Dwarves will no longer need to be tools that slave away, forging weapons for the humans. We will be the chosen race that will lead this underdeveloped continent into a new era alongside Him,” I sighed.

“Was He really that powerful, Dear? You are the only one that has had direct communication with this ‘being’. What was he like?” my wife leaned her head on her arm, getting comfortable.

“It was nothing like I’d ever imagined. I’ve had my share of time fighting mana beasts when I was younger. Unlike the old dwarves that stick to their traditions, I carried no pride in the weapons that I had built. What satisfaction was there in watching someone mindlessly swing the weapon you poured your blood and sweat into crafting? No, the only weapon I ever finished, I had made for myself. Using my war axe, Full Cleave, I slayed hundreds of mana beasts of all classes. There were some that could send shivers straight down my spine with just a passing glance, while others could petrify even the strongest of mages with a glare” —I took another sip from my

glass— "Yet, when he first made himself known to me, I couldn't breathe. My head felt like it was getting pounded by hammers while my whole body stung as if each pore was being stabbed by tiny needles. I've lingered at the gates of death countless times, but nothing had ever made me so fearful."

Looking down at my hands, I see that they were trembling. "I told you this before, but I truly felt like I was facing a god. I had this overwhelming notion that he didn't need me in order to achieve his goals, yet he was giving me this chance. He chose us, My Love. He chose us," I whispered.

"I believe you, My Dear. And when he takes rule of this Continent, what was it that he promised us again?" My wife scooted next to me, cuddling against my arm as her large hands wrapped around my waist.

"He promised us everything we could ever hope for: vast wealth, magical capabilities that are beyond comprehension, more people to serve us, and best of all, an eternity to enjoy them all. Glaundera, I can finally, once again, swing Full Cleave. No more will this crippled body of mine hinder me," I said, my voice growing louder the more excited I became.

"That's great, My Dear. Truly, being in the Council is hindering your full potential," my wife cooed, coaxing me as she rubbed my belly.

I leaned further back, enjoying her touch. "Hah! We three kings have a joke we say to one another. We joke around how the three kings of this generation all lack the talent and potential as mages, calling it the Dicathen's Kings' Complex. Screw them! Unlike the other two, I was once a great mage. Being an orange core mage by the time I was at my prime, I would have soared to greater heights if it wasn't for that damned incident that left me in this pitiful state."

What I never told my wife was that the 'incident' happened because I had some fun with a peasant girl.

I unconsciously licked my lips as I recalled that night. It would've been a lot more enjoyable if she wasn't screaming so loudly.

I don't know how her husband found out, but he was crafty enough to get me alone, even using his own wife as bait. Of course, I ended up killing the both of them to hide my little secret, but not before he was able to land a wound on me that would forever

cripple my mana core. “Curse them! They should have just quietly accepted their fate; in fact, they should’ve seen it as an honor!” I cursed. To have put me in such a pathetic state, even torturing and killing them wasn’t enough.

“Dear, hush! The dwarves all respect you and you know that,” my wife scolded gently, snapping me out from my bitter memories.

“Respect? Bah, bull testicles! They all grudgingly obey me because of the two lances I have in my possession. I can feel it. Their eyes when they look at me, I know that they’re thinking: ‘Why is such a weak dwarf leading us?’ ‘He was just born lucky. He doesn’t deserve the crown and lances.’”

“Then we can kill all those that had once looked down on you, simple as that. And you will do it with your own two fists.” My wife moved her hand up, stroking my beard with her thick fingers as she looked up at me, her soothing smile accentuating her powerful square jaw. “You forgot one thing, though.”

“Of course. He also promised us fertility. We will finally be able to have sons and daughters of our own to carry on the Greysunders blood. In fact, why not see if he has already blessed us with it.” I put down my wine glass and shifted my body to face my wife. As I looked deep into her dirt brown eyes, I dug underneath her clothes to feel her warm, coarse skin. I could feel her shudder from my touch as I continued softly rubbing her back, slowly reaching lower and lower.

As her eyes closed in pleasure, I used my other hand to untie her thin gown. When I slipped my hand underneath her top, she gasped in surprise from the chill of my fingers on her firm, exposed bosom.

I slipped off her gown to reveal her defined shoulders, smiling at the mesmerizing sight. I never understood the tastes of human and elf men, all wanting thin women. A real woman has to have muscles like these.

My wife inched closer impatiently as I took my sweet time undressing her; coaxing her as I spread her legs—

Bang!

The door to our room slammed open, only to show my guard, who had been stationed outside, looking wide-eyed at us.

“What is the meaning of this!” I roared. “How dare you barge in without—”

Like a wooden plank, the guard leaned forward and dropped to the ground without a word. Upon realizing that there was a hole through his back where his heart should’ve been, I immediately sprang up from our previous intimate posture.

He was dead.

“My greetings, Greysunders.” A cold, hoarse voice filled my ears. As I took a step back, I could see my wife quickly redressing, fumbling as she herself got off the couch.

“How dare you barge into this room? Do you know who I am?” I screamed, fear filling the very depth of my soul as I stared at the figure. I couldn’t make out his features from the shadows of where he stood.

“That is of no importance. You two are the only infestations I need to take care of,” he spoke evenly.

Just as a light flashed towards us, a wall of molten lava intersected just in time to stop the intruder’s attack. However, I could taste the blood that trickled down from the tip of my nose into my mouth from the glowing needle that was barely stopped in time by my lance’s magic.

“Ol-Olfred! How could you let someone just barge into my room?” Stumbling backwards, my firm rebuke to my lance ended up sounding much more like a frightened whimper.

“My apologies, Your Majesties. I do not know how he managed to get in but I have notified Mica as well. The intruder will not be leaving,” my lance stated. Even as he gave my wife and me a curt bow, his eyes never left the shadowed figure.

Mica was the second lance under my command. While she wasn’t as obedient as Olfred, her skills as a mage was enough to allow me to be lenient with her.

“Good, good. T-take care of that intruder right now! I want him alive if possible!” I pointed my finger at the figure, hoping my wife wasn’t able to see that it was trembling fiercely.

“I seek only for the Greysunders’ heads. Needless bloodshed is not my desire,” the voice spoke coolly.

I backed up against the wall involuntarily when he spoke. For some reason he left me feeling terrified. No, now with Olfred is here and Mica on her way, I should have nothing to worry about.

“Unfortunately, the thing I seek is your head,” Olfred hissed, his limbs becoming engulfed in flames as he manifested mana into them.

The bright flames emitted from my lance as he dashed towards the intruder revealed the latter’s features, and knowing exactly who I was facing did not quell the fear inside me. Instead, it made me even more horrified.

He was elderly, with long, white hair tied tightly into a ponytail, flowing down like a stream of liquid pearl. Yet, despite his age, he stood, poised, with his hands elegantly placed behind his straight back. Both of his eyes were closed, bringing further emphasis on a third, unblinking eye in his forehead that glowed a radiant purple.

[Magma Knights]

As my lance casted his spell in a whisper, five soldiers made of magma were instantly conjured from beneath the intruder. However, as they reached for the elderly man, they crumbled into pieces with merely a faint blur of the intruder’s arm.

Olfred continue to conjure magma knights but each time they arose, they were just as quickly diced into little pieces by a movement too fast for my eyes.

“Bestow onto me,” Olfred chanted through gritted teeth.

[Hell’s Armor]

My lance’s body completely erupted into dark crimson flames as he approached the intruder. As the flames subsided, I could see the intricate armor made of magma that had covered Olfred. Glowing red runes intricately covered the armor, as a cape of billowing fire flowed down his back.

“Haha! This is what you get for being so arrogant! Die!” I cheered manically. A crazed smile formed on my face as I watched my lance about to destroy the intruder that had left me in such a pathetic state.

Olfred’s first blow landed squarely on the intruder’s face, even completely decimating the wall behind him with the shockwave. My fist clenched in excitement as I awaited

to see the bloody mush that his face should've now become.

However, as the dust cloud faded, I felt my mouth hang open from shock. The intruder's face was intact and unblemished, yet Olfred's armored arm was snapped in two, his fist reduced to a bloody pulp. I could see splinters of white coming out of his knuckles from where his bones snapped.

"I admire your skills for a lesser being. Your powers could prove useful for the future of this continent, but now, you are only an irritant." As the intruder spoke, he manifested a thin, glowing blade from the tip of his finger.

His next movement was so quick, it seemed as if he had teleported, but he was simply moving at such a monstrous speed that my eyes couldn't comprehend.

The intruder blinked a few feet to where Olfred stood on guard, and the tip of his glowing saber gently touched the center of my lance's armored chest.

"Break."

The Hell's Amor, ranked one of the highest fire-attribute defensive spells, shattered into dust. Blood spewed out of Olfred's mouth as he was flung across the room and into the wall that I was backed up against.

I could only stare blankly at the scene. A shiver ran down my back as I felt the intruder's unblinking eye on me.

My throat was too dry to even swallow, let alone utter a word. As I looked at the trembling figure of my wife, an earth-shattering sound made me whip my head back.

"Hello King and Queen. Mica is sorry that she's late!" a familiar voice chirped from within the cloud of dust.

"M-Mica! Your King was almost killed! Hurry up and dispose of that man!" I spouted out, holding onto my wife.

Mica was an anomaly amongst dwarves. She didn't have any of the usual traits that would make a dwarven lady attractive. She was short but thin, with pale creamy skin instead of the usual bronze skin that was so admired.

Her features made her appear as if she was a feeble human child, her slightly pointed

ears the only indication that she was really a dwarf. Despite her meagre appearance, her abilities in gravity manipulation was monstrous. Wielding a giant mace more than triple her size, she was able to freely control the weight of anything within a certain radius.

As the dust cloud dissipated, I could see that the intruder had completely dodged Mica's surprise attack.

"Another annoyance." The intruder's voice sounded a bit more put off this time, but that could've just been me.

Before he could make his way towards me, the ground crumbled around him and my lance.

"Welcome to Mica's world. Don't die!" my lance giggled as she easily swung her giant morningstar.

"Excellent gravity manipulation," the intruder nodded as he approached my lance. I could tell Mica was caught off guard when her opponent so easily walked towards her, each of his steps creating a deep imprint as the floor tiles cracked from the increased gravity.

Even with my life in danger, a nagging feeling of jealousy sprouted. This is what I desired— power to fight like this; to be at the apex of strength and magical capabilities.

"How can you move so easily? Your body weighs more than four tons!" Mica hissed as she slowly retreated, maintaining a careful distance from him.

"Is that your limit?" The man asked.

"Huh?" my lance responded, not expecting a question in response.

"It seems it is."

"What limits? Mica has no limits!" my lance yelled as she jumped up for her final attack. Imbuing more mana into her weapon, I could see slight ripples in the space around it due to the distortion of gravity. "Eat this!"

Her mace swung down with a force that I suspect could bring this entire castle to the

ground, but the intruder simply lifted a single finger in response, effortlessly stopping the otherwise monstrous strike.

A wave of hopelessness overcame me Despite the magnitude of my lance's power, I knew she couldn't win.

I scrambled to my feet. I can't die here. I need to escape.

From the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of light as the intruder formed a glowing blade that pierced through Mica. From what I could see, there was no wound from where she was slashed, but it must've done something to her since she fell to the floor with the whites of her eyes visible, her mace crashing heavily onto the ground.

That useless brat couldn't even provide me with enough time to escape.

The intruder turned to face my wife and I with his thin glowing blade...

Glaundera shrieked with her finger pointed menacingly at the figure, "Y-you don't know who you're messing with. My husband will soon be the new right hand of Agora of the Vritra, an almighty deity—"

"Shut up!" I hissed, striking her face before she could finish.

"Asura. There are no deities in this world, only asuras," the man corrected as he slowly approached us.

"P-please, have mercy and spare me O' Great One." I could feel a growing warmth between my legs as I got on my knees and begged.

"Do you want to live?" he asked as his single eye looked down at me.

"Y-yes! Please! I'll do anything!" I pleaded as I tried to wrap my head around the situation at hand. Who, in this continent, could possibly dispose of a white core mage so easily?

"I see that Agora failed to choose his pawns with proper caution," he continued, his voice filled with contempt.

"Please, I've never even met him. He only called out to me, threatening to kill my wife and my people had I not obeyed. I-I beg you. This was all against my will," I pleaded,

prostrating myself on my hands and knees as my forehead touched the warm puddle of my own urine.

“Very well. Release the two lances that you have in your possession from the oath,” he commanded, his voice even and cold.

“R-release?” I stuttered.

“Yes. Is that a problem?” His single eye narrowed.

“No, of course not.” I took off the artifact that I had always kept around my neck and imbued my mana signature into it. As I released the oath, blood dribbled down the corners of my mouth.

I was instructed by my father to never undo the oath, that it could and should never be undone. However, my life was at stake here.

As both Olfred and Mica glowed a faint red indicating that the artifact’s bind has been released, I looked back at the intruder.

“T-there! I did it.”

“Good. They were unfortunate to have such a poor master, but they will be useful pieces in the upcoming war,” he responded, nodding as he looked at the two lances.

“N-now please. Let me go.” I hated how my voice sounded so weak and desperate.

“I’m sorry, did I say I’d let you go?” As I looked up, there was a change in his expression; for the first time a small smirk formed on face.

I tried responding but nothing came out.

No words... no sound... no breath...

Looking down, I could see the gaping hole in my throat and all I could do was stare at him, my jaw slack. As my vision faded, I peeled my gaze from the intruder and glanced at my wife. She was staring back as she reached desperately for me, a hole in her chest while blood soaked her thin gown.

Everything darkened. I could feel a cold hand grasping my soul, pulling me away from

my body.

“Let the game of chess begin.” The intruder’s last words echoed from afar as my consciousness drifted into whichever level of hell the hand decided to take me.

Chapter 103

Peculiar Congregation

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

There was an expression of ever-so-slight amusement reaching the raised brow of Windsom's sharp eyes. The asura, still donning a military-esque uniform paired with a trim, side-swept hairstyle to match, held out my bond.

"Sylvie!" I exclaimed. I bolted up from my seat but was extra careful in picking her up out of Windsom's hand. Upon careful inspection, there were no visible wounds on her body, and by the rhythmic breathing, it seemed that she was simply asleep.

Letting out a relieved sigh, I carefully placed my sleeping dragon on my head before regarding the asura standing before me.

"Thank you." I gave him a meaningful nod to which he responded with a look a parent would give to one's child after he or she had misbehaved.

"I had known you were rash, but to think you would get yourself and Lady Sylvie caught so soon, and by the ones involved with the Vritra no less," he reprimanded.

"To be fair, I was saving the academy from the Vritra," I half shrugged, as if that would validate my actions.

"You need to understand that you and Lady Sylvie's safety should take the most precedence as of now."

"Windsom, there were people inside that academy whose life I considered more important than my own." My face grew stern, reflecting the resolve in my voice.

Windsom regarded me for a moment before speaking again. "Was it for the Elf Princess?" he asked as if he already knew the answer.

"It-it wasn't just for her," I defended, my voice coming out a lot more unconfident than I had wanted.

“No matter,” the asura sighed. “What’s done is done. Speaking of this, what I do not understand is why the perpetrator of the incident took your friend, Elijah, with him.”

“I don’t know either...” I was at a loss as well, and no matter how many times I pondered about it inside my cell, I couldn’t come up with a reasonable explanation.

“I don’t know,” I repeated. “But I need you to help us out of here, Windsom. I need to find out where they took Elijah and—”

“And what? Save him?” the asura cut in, his deep-set eyes cold and penetrating. “You can’t even escape from this place but you think you have the ability to save him?”

After letting out a deep breath, he lowered his voice and continued. “Besides, I know roughly where the man named Draneeve took your friend.”

“Really? Where?” I unknowingly grabbed onto his sleeve as I said this.

“After investigating the artifact left at Xyrus Academy, I suspect it was a teleportation device that Draneeve had used to escape, along with your friend Elijah... as well as the device he had used to...”

“...to get here,” I finished the sentence, a feeling of dread growing inside me. “They took Elijah back to Alacrya, didn’t they?”

“Most likely,” he replied, his voice cold.

I slumped back against the wall, staring at my feet as neither of us spoke for a while.

“Windsom, following my train of thought, I was going to suggest that I follow Elijah to Alacrya in the hopes that he would still be alive so that I can save him. You would then probably going to respond by telling me that I shouldn’t even dream of it since I’d get killed as soon as I step foot...” I looked back at him and a truly rare moment dawned on me where I had no answer. “So what do I do?”

“Well I wouldn’t say you’d die as soon as you stepped foot,” the asura smiled slightly, hints of empathy evident in his usually cold voice. “But yes, it would be suicide. Luckily, the pawn the Vritra Clan had sent left before you arrived, otherwise they would be much more wary of you. As of now, they hold an interest in you enough for them to want you in their possession, alive, but if they find out that you actually have Lady Sylvia’s innate will as well as her daughter, then I’m afraid even the asuras will have a

hard time keeping the two of you safe.”

“What am I to do then? Just give up on my best friend?” I countered. “I calculated the possibility of receiving aid from the Elf King and I also knew you’d help us escape, but even thus, there wouldn’t be a safe place for us to stay. Considering that the Council is working for the Vritra, I would either have to stay where my family is hiding, or burrow somewhere deep within the Beast Glades.

“Staying hidden with my family, I wouldn’t be able to train without revealing my mana signature to the lances, endangering my family and Tessia’s. If I choose to go to the Beast Glades, I most likely wouldn’t survive long enough to get any reasonable training done.” I thought of the echoes of the giant mana beasts that we passed on our way here, and how even the lances were cautious enough not to brazenly mow through.

“You seem to have quite a good grasp on the situation at hand,” the asura acknowledged, giving me a terse nod. “How much have you managed to connect the Vritra with the Council?”

“Enough to reasonably suspect that the ones most closely connected to the Vritra were the Greysunders. The humans seemed to be favoring the opinion of the dwarves as well, but I have a hunch that they are reluctant,” I thought aloud.

“Impressive,” Windsom admitted. Sliding back his left sleeve, the asura looked at his watch. “Arthur it is about time we—”

“Who are you.” a voice interrupted.

Both Windsom and I turned our heads to see that it was Bairon.

“It seems he has finished taking care of things,” Windsom muttered softly to himself.

‘How did you get in here?’ The lance’s eyes narrowed as his glance flickered between the asura next to me and the supposedly locked up dragon on top of my head. Despite how rash Bairon had acted with me, I realized that he was actually very cautious and level-headed under normal circumstance. He regarded Windsom with caution, not leaving any openings in his stance even when they were separated by a reinforced cage.

“I asked how you got in here,” Bairon growled, his eyes glued on the mysterious visitor. “Are you with the other intruder?”

“Yes,” Windsom replied indifferently, taking a step toward the lance.

“Then an explanation is no longer necessary.” Bairon raised his fist like a loaded cannon as the gathered electricity crackled and popped around his arm.

[Flash Ray]

I frantically jumped out of the way, upon knowing what was coming. Windsom had forgotten to remove the artifact strapped to my chest, disabling my mana flow. If I were to get hit with that spell, there wouldn't even be ashes left to bury.

A condensed sphere of electricity shot out from the lance's fist, disintegrating the reinforced metal bars as if it were tissue. However, Windsom stayed glued to his position as the spell rapidly approached him.

I braced myself for when the ball of lightning would collide with the asura, but as Bairon high-level magic reached Windsom, the asura simply reached up and caught the spell as if were a rubber ball.

I knew, undoubtedly, that Windsom would be able to handle the attack, but even I didn't expect it to be done so easily.

Crushing the orb of condensed lightning in his palm, he turned to me, gesturing with a flick of his head. “Looks like we have our way out.”

I let out a snort of laughter, but before we could say anything else, Bairon had already reached Windsom.

“Child. There is no longer a reason for you to fight me,” Windsom said coolly as he easily dodged the barrage of strikes and kicks imbued with lightning. Unlike me, Bairon's lightning magic seemed to mostly consist of external spells.

[Thunder Lance]

Bairon activated a spell in the midst of his attacks, conjuring five spears made of lightning to stab down at Windsom.

I had moved in the cell to avoid the brunt of their fight, but as I continued observing, it looked to me like Windsom was actually... bored.

“Enough.” With a simple flick of his arm that seemed slow in comparison to Bairon’s rapid succession of attacks, the lance’s face was buried in the ground. The entire cell shook as a spiderweb of cracks split the reinforced floor, Bairon’s sunken head being the epicenter.

From catching his spell to burying his face, Windsom was doing a fine job humiliating one of our continent’s strongest mage.

“Heel,” Windsom said impatiently as the lance struggled to free his head from the ground. Although Bairon’s face was scratched and a little bloody, he was otherwise unfazed.

“Bairon, stand your ground.” My ears perked at the familiar voice. It was Varay, the female lance that had encaged Sylvie, and was capable of going up against two lances herself.

“I don’t understand. He’s with the intruder!” Bairon spouted, turning to face his fellow lance.

“HE is a deity, not someone you can be addressing so flippantly!” Varay snapped back, her voice particularly cold. “My apologies, O’ Great One. Our King humbly asks for your presence.”

Despite knowing what Windsom was, it still stunned me to see Varay actually bow to someone. In comparison, Bairon had such a look of confusion that it was actually pretty amusing.

“D-Deity?” The lance stuttered stupidly.

“Correct. And now that you know what I am, ignorance is no longer an excuse,” Windsom answered, looking down harshly at Bairon. “Bow.”

By the way Bairon’s head slammed into the ground again, it looked like Windsom had done something to forcibly make him kneel, but it was a pleasant sight to see nonetheless.

We were led back to the room where my trial had taken place, except this time I wasn’t chained. Bairon had very reluctantly broken my shackles and removed the artifact inhibiting my mana flow after the whole fiasco ended.

A different guard from last time opened the door for us, revealing the people inside the room.

“W-Welcome.” King Blaine was the first to speak, rising from his chair. His complexion, along with Queen Priscilla’s, was almost sickly as they sat around an oval table that hadn’t been there previously.

Sitting adjacent to the human king and queen were Tessia’s parents, Alduin and Meralith, along with their hooded lance that delivered the note to me the night before. Both the King and Queen of the elves acknowledged me with an uncomfortable greeting, but otherwise stayed silent. Also sitting on the table was Director Cynthia, who wore a baffle expression to compliment her disheveled appearance.

When I locked eyes with the man sitting next to her, I unknowingly leaped back on guard. All of the hairs on my body stood on end as every fiber of my being begged for me to run away from the elderly man that had a single eye on his forehead.

“Arthur. It is okay,” Windsom consoled.

I found it odd that the Greysunders weren’t present, but the rest of the people inside of the room, minus the one person I didn’t know, rose up from their seat and gave a small, respectable bow to Windsom.

Acknowledging their gestures, he motioned for me to take a seat with him at the table. As I sat down next to Windsom, I could feel the gears in my head turning, trying to make heads of the situation at hand. Here I was, sitting next alongside the Council and their lances; Director Cynthia, who had been a prisoner sentenced to death; and a man, whose identity I had no clue about.

There was a palpable tension in the room, enough to drive a normal person out of this room in sweat and fear. I had placed Sylvie on my lap during this time so I was currently petting her when I heard someone rise from their seat.

Unexpectedly, the one to get up was the man I had instinctively wanted to escape from. It seemed as if he had three eyes, yet two of them were closed. His white hair was tied in the back, reminding me of Virion when I had first met him.

“For those who do not know who I am”—the purple eye on his forehead focused on me—“I am Aldir.”

“Windsom and I have been sent here to give you lesser beings a chance of survival in the imminent war with the Vritra,” the asura continued without pause.

“So, just as we feared, there really will be a war...” Alduin spoke aloud as if he was simply voicing his thoughts.

“I have done the first step of discarding the corrupted. My role here now is to oversee the remainder of what you lessers call ‘the Council’ and instruct you on the necessary preparations to fight against the Continent of Alacrya.”

As soon as the word corrupted came out, both Blaine and Priscilla Glayder froze, their complexion becoming paler.

“Y-Your Majesty. If I may say something...” Blaine was the one to speak, and by the manner of his speech, it seemed that something must have happened to make the King appear so meek. “You have clearly shown us your capabilities, enough for me to believe that you are not someone of this realm. The difference in our abilities are to the point where I am unsure of why you would need us. Can’t you simply go to the Continent of Alacrya and defeat the Vritra?”

“What did that other asura mean by discarding the corrupted?” I leaned towards Windsom, whispering in his ear.

“The Greysunders have been eliminated and their lances are now under my control,” Aldir answered in Windsom’s stead.

Everything made sense. It seemed like the asura killed the ones working directly for the Vritra while leaving the Glayders with some sort of warning. That was why the human King and Queen were such a nervous wreck.

“And as for your point, King Glayder. Yes it would be simple enough to gather the asuras and personally fight against the Vritra. However, the Vritra Clan, along with the three other clans that are under their command were all former asuras that have broken our law. Even we can no longer calculate how much stronger they have truly become. Moreover, a battle of that magnitude will undoubtedly level the world. And that’s me being conservative,” Aldir continued as he faced the frightened King.

King Glayder responded with stunned silence as we all tried to imagine the magnitude of a battle that could sink continents.

Aldir continued speaking, “We asuras and the Vritra Clan had agreed upon a treaty where no higher beings can directly attack one another or interfere with any lesser beings. Instead—”

“Hold on. Doesn’t the fact that you killed two ‘lesser beings’ go against your words?” I cut in.

The asura’s glowing, purple eye narrowed as it peered into me, but after a brief moment Aldir’s lips curled into a smirk.

“Dicathen had received no direct aid from us asuras, but is now up against a population governed directly by Agrona of the Vritra. Even with my actions, he wouldn’t be rash enough to break the treaty for us simply evening out the playing field,” Windsom answered in Aldir’s stead.

“What of the black-horned demons that have been invading our land for years? One was even responsible for killing a lance,” I countered.

“You’re talking about the owner of this fragment?” Director Goodsky was the one to answer, holding up the black fragment of the horned being that killed Alea Triscan.

“Boy, I see it wasn’t a lie when Windsom said you are not simple. The being responsible for killing the lance, and the ones that have snuck into this continent are not asuras. Those monsters were once lesser beings such as yourself that have gone through countless experiments,” Aldir spat, obviously disgusted.

“So there are monsters that are not asuras capable of destroying the strongest mages in our continent? Is it even possible for us to win?” Merial Alduin, Tessia’s mother spoke for the first time.

“Yes, but they are limited and Agrona’s precious trump card in this war. Now that he knows of my presence, he will not dispatch them so recklessly as before.” Aldir sat back down, his whole body turned toward me.

“Think of me as a general in this upcoming war. It is for the asuras’ best interest that we are able to defend this continent. Now, Windsom, isn’t there something you and the boy have to do? I will take care of the rest here. We require countless preparations before we could defend ourselves”

Giving the three-eyed asura a nod, Windsom pulled me up, leading me and the

sleeping Sylvie out of the room.

“Something we have to do, Windsom? Isn’t it important that we participate in the discussion? Shouldn’t we be there in the room as well?” I asked as I followed the asura.

“That is not your fight. Aldir knows what he is doing and will do his best to prepare you lessers for the imminent war. When that time comes, if you do not want to be useless, we need you stronger.”

“Makes sense, so what are we going to do?”

“First, we’re going to visit your family. You will need to say your goodbyes to them.” The asura’s back was still facing me, making it unable to determine whether he was joking or not.

“Goodbyes? What goodbyes? Where will I be going?” I pulled back the asura’s arm, surprised as he turned around so easily.

“I’m taking you and Lady Sylvie to the homeland of the asuras. Your training will be held in Epheotus.”

Chapter 104

The Great Eight

“Am I allowed to know all of this?” I questioned, removing a sharp branch out of my hair.

We were currently hiking through a familiar part of Elshire Forest after Windsom had teleported us nearby. It took me only a few moments upon arrival to realize that I had been to this part of the forest before with the Eralith family; we were headed towards Elder Rinia’s hideout.

“You have been given permission to stay in Epheotus so you will figure it out sooner or later. While memorizing the information that I’ve told you isn’t necessary, it is always beneficial for one to know the culture, mannerisms and politics involved when in unfamiliar territory. Especially if you have to interact with the important figures of said place.” Windsom advised, not bothering to turn around as he continued pushing branches and vines out of his way. “But I have a feeling that you already know the importance of that.”

“Of course,” I smirked. “But knowledge without understanding is but a sword stuck in its sheath. Now, you’ve told me the what, Windsom, but you’ve yet to tell me the why.”

“Very true,” he admitted. “Do not worry, we’ll get to that soon enough.”

I went on. “Okay, so there are sev... no, eight races of asuras in Epheotus. Each race consists of multiple clans, but only one clan within their respective race are titled as one of the High Eight?”

“The Great Eight,” the asura corrected immediately.

“What race was the Vritra Clan?” I tried to imagine multiple times in the past what sort of creature the Vritra Clan might be, with their horns and grey complexion, but nothing came to mind.

“The true form of the Vritra Clan is that of a fearsome serpentine asura called the Basilisk. It will be good for you to take note of the races and clan names of the Great

Eight.”

“What became of the Basilisk race after the Vritra Clan and other Basilisk clans’ betrayal? I pressed on, swatting a particularly annoying insect that had probably thought my ear would make a good resting spot.

“Excluding the fact that the Vritra Clan was replaced by a lesser clan as part of the Great Eight, some of the more radical races pushed to annihilate whatever remained of the Basilisk race. Fortunately, the ties between each race reach far back in history; friends of the remaining Basilisk clans stood up for them. In the end, measures as drastic as a genocide were never taken; it would be foolish for a whole race to bear the crimes of a few, after all.”

I couldn’t discern what Windsom was thinking as he told me all of this. The inflection and tone of his voice didn’t match what he was saying, his words sounding almost sardonic.

“I see...” I continued walking, looking at my dirty boots crunching on fallen leaves and broken branches. “How were the Great Eight selected anyway?”

“The clans of the Great Eight have almost never changed. For example, even though the Dragon race has the fewest number of clans, the Indrath Clan, the clan of my master and Lady Sylvia, has been the part of the Great Eight since the beginning of our history. However, even to this day, the strength of the Great Clans are grades above the rest of the others. This is about the closest thing to an answer I can give you.”

We continued to rally back and forth as we made our way towards Elder Rinia’s hidden shelter, Windsom mostly quizzing me on the names I needed to know. I was able to process most of the information fairly quickly, but my sleep-deprived and starved state took a toll on my ability to retain information.

“Anyway, not to sound like a brat, but couldn’t you have brought us any closer? If you teleported us from an airborne castle in the middle of the Beast Glades to Elshire Forest, I’m sure you could’ve teleported us a few miles closer...”

“The home of the Diviner Elf that your family is currently taking refuge in is surrounded by a fairly large barrier that I did not wish to agitate. Teleporting through it might’ve caused a ripple in the barrier, which might give away the location of everyone inside.”

“Ah... my apologies then. I’m a little on edge in my current state,” I responded, scratching my head.

We had just gone through the waterfall that hid the entrance to Elder Rinia’s home when I spoke. “So let me get this straight. Agrona, current head of the Vritra Clan, led his race out of Epheotus to Alacrya, where he had been experimenting on the lesser races, and declared himself Eternal Ruler?”

“A rather tasteless title to give to oneself but, in essence, yes,” the asura confirmed.

“Then this treaty that you guys talked about earlier; if the Vritra Clan, along with the other clans of the Basilisk race, are asuras, shouldn’t they be forbidden to directly act in this upcoming war?” I asked, trying to keep track of how many turns we took in this maze of a tunnel.

“Yes, but that was never the problem”—Windsom stopped walking and turned back towards me—“Arthur, didn’t you ever once wonder why the asura races didn’t just kill the Vritra Clan and the clans following them? There are seven other races after all.”

“Of course I have, but didn’t you say something about the consequences that would affect the lesser races that were living in Alacrya?”

“I did, but what I had not informed you of was that the treaty was not our first course of action. After Agrona and his follower’s escape, the Great Clans, excluding the Basilisk race, came together for the first time, regardless of factions, and formed an assembly of the leaders of each Great Clan. The leaders decided to send a small division with our elite asuras to quickly dispose of Agrona and his followers.” Windsom paused for a moment, and even with his stoic expression, it was obvious that he was deliberating on whether to express what was on his mind.

The asura eventually let out a small sigh and conjured a small barrier around us. “Arthur, what I’m about to disclose to you must stay with you; this information is known only by a few members of the Indrath Clan.”

I nodded, locking eyes with Windsom as I waited for him to continue.

“Everyone in Epheotus believe that Lady Sylvia was somehow captured and held prisoner somewhere, but it was actually Lady Sylvia who voluntarily went with the elite division tasked with killing Agrona Vritra and the clans that followed him.”

“What?” I exclaimed, my voice coming out a lot louder than I had meant it to. “How does that make sense? She went on a mission into enemy territory without knowing what to expect? That mission was basically suicidal. No way your master, Sylvia’s father, would’ve let her go.”

“Of course Lord Indrath didn’t allow her to go,” Windsom growled. “What I’m saying is Lady Sylvia concealed herself and followed after the elite division. By the time they were aware of Lady Sylvia’s presence, it was already too late to back out.”

There was a long pause before either of us spoke again.

“So what ended up happening to the asuras sent by the leaders of Epheotus?”

“What none of the leaders had expected”—Windsom’s face contorted in disgust as his hands formed a fist— “Agrona, that cunning snake, was waiting with an even larger army of Basilisks and lesser races that had the same innate magical abilities as them.”

It took only a moment for me to realize what his words implied. “The Vritra Clan was interbreeding with the lesser races of Alacrya,” I whispered.

The asura only nodded in return, before continuing. “Apparently, Agrona and his followers had been interbreeding for quite some time, seeing that there were well over tens of thousands of the mutts waiting for our battalion.”

“So the band of elite asuras you guys sent were outnumbered...”

“Tremendously outnumbered,” he stressed. “And the element of surprise that we thought our warriors would have had was rendered moot.”

“What befell them in the end?” I murmured, more so wondering myself than expecting an answer.

The asura shook his head in response. “Communication was lost soon after the battle started. While we are certain that their side took a considerable loss in numbers, we can only speculate that the brigade of our elite asuras, the pride of their respective clans and races, were either killed or captured.”

I was silent as thoughts on how Sylvia managed to escape filled my mind.

Windsom’s next words snapped me out of my daze. “Lord Indrath was furious after

being told by Agrona himself that his only daughter had been killed in battle. If it had been up to him, my master would surely have waged war, ignoring the consequences. However, the rest of the Great Clans were against it and pushed for a treaty.” Windsom turned around and resumed walking again.

“The treaty was eventually formed between the two sides, forbidding the asuras to act directly because of the collateral damage it would cause if a full-scale war were to occur between the seven asura races of Epheotus and the Vritra Clan’s army of basilisks and lesser, half-breed mutts.” There was an obvious spite in his voice, but his expression had turned back to normal.

As I began thinking again, I realized how much of a disadvantage Dicathen was in. This treaty had been in place since generations ago, and even though it prohibited asuras and the half-breeds from directly participating in the battles, who knows how many of the so-called ‘lesser races’ of Alacrya had blood of asuras mixed in with theirs.

I wanted to ask why the other asura races didn’t do the same and interbreed with the lesser-races, but if it took centuries for the mad genius Agrona to come up with a way to interbreed an asura with a lesser race, then the other races probably haven’t found a way how. I doubt that, even if they could, most would be against breeding with the lower races because of their own morals and pride.

“Wait. So the ancient six artifacts that you guys gave to the people of Dicathen...”

“Yes. It was our way of giving the people of this continent a sword and a shield. We knew that the powers and knowledge contained within those artifacts would ignite a revolution for your people. We were right, but we only found out through recent events that it hadn’t been nearly enough. It is Lord Indrath and the other Great Clans leaders’ wish that, with our direct intervention, we can equip the mages of this continent with enough strength to defend this continent from Agrona. We fear that if Agrona gets access to the inhabitants of this continent, the Vritra Clan will gain enough fighting power to overthrow Epheotus.”

“And this is where I come in. A stronger chess piece that the Great Clans can utilize to gain the upper hand in the upcoming war,” I sneered, crossing my arms.

“Well, I would think of it more as, us training you to defend your family and homeland,” Windsom countered, his lips curling upward ever-so-slightly.

“Meh, I prefer the mutual benefit over questionable acts of altruism anyhow,” I shrugged.

“I guess you still don’t trust us completely,” Windsom said, studying me with a curious eye before asking, “On a side note, how do you plan on informing your family of our... plans?”

“Don’t worry, Windsom. I thought a lot about how I should break it to my parents while I was in jail,” I winked, walking past the asura and toward the flickering fire-light coming from the end of the tunnel.



As we approached the end of the tunnel, I could see the shadows of a few people surrounding a fire. I couldn’t help but smile at the sight of my large warrior of a father scrubbing dishes near the underground stream as Elder Rinia, my sister and my mother were concentrated on a simmering pot over the fire.

“Something smells delicious! Did you make enough for me?” I yelled out, causing everyone to whip their heads in my direction.

Each of them had a different reaction as they realized who it was that spoke. My father dropped the dented pan he was scrubbing, my mother and sister simultaneously bolted up from the makeshift chair that they were sitting on, while Elder Rinia simply gave me a meaningful smile as she continued peeling the potato in her hand. The only one that I didn’t see was Tessia, but I wasn’t sure if she was even here or not.

In seconds, I was wrapped in the embrace of my family as my mother and father checked my body for any signs of injuries while my sister’s gaze went straight toward the sleeping Sylvie in my arms.

“Is Sylvie okay?” She asked, concern laced in her voice as she held my bond in her arms.

“Your brother just escaped from prison and you don’t even ask if I’m okay?” I croaked, pretending to be hurt.

“Mm... you always seem to come back alive anyway,” she shrugged, focusing her attention back to Sylvie. This caused a snort of laughter from my father as my mother did her best to chastise my sister while trying to hide her smile.

I felt a sharp pang in my chest at my sister's callous words. Where was the sweet child that stuck to me like glue and shed tears whenever she couldn't see me? Is she already at the rebellious stage?

It seemed that someone had already informed my family that I would be visiting them soon, and going by expressions, I would bet that it was Elder Rinia.

My parents were interrogating me on the full details of what exactly happened, but stopped dead in their tracks all of a sudden.

The soft footsteps that echoed through the tunnel stopped behind me, and I took no hesitation in introducing the person.

"Everyone, this is the person that helped me through everything while I was imprisoned... and also my prospective master."

I waited for some sort of reaction, but my parents and sister were still silent, frozen in place as their eyes were still glued to the figure behind me.

"Ahem, tone it down." I turned behind me to see Windsom look at me in confusion before his eyes widened a bit in understanding.

"My apologies," he replied, and the air around us changed back to normal. I had gotten used to the pressure the asura normally gave off, but to a normal mage, it would be suffocating.

My mother and sister fell on her knees while my father stumbled, barely keeping himself on his feet.

Elder Rinia, who was a bit farther away, stood up and gave a deep bow toward Windsom. I'm not sure if she knew his identity, but she, at least, seemed to understand that the unknown person was not someone ordinary.

"Welcome to my humble abode. Please, make yourself comfortable." The elderly elf spoke in a well-mannered, respectful tone that I've never heard her use before.

Windsom simply nodded in response, filling the tunnel with silence except for the crackling of the fire.

My father was the first to speak. "Firstly, th-thank you for helping my son. I know that

he can be a handful.”

The asura actually let out a faint smile at this before speaking. “It seems your child has caused you many worries.”

“And will continue to do so in the future,” my mother finished as my father helped her and my sister back up. “But Arthur, what did you mean by prospective master?”

“Alice, your son just came back from a long journey. There’s plenty of time for this topic after he’s gotten something inside his belly,” Rinia scolded, ushering everyone back around the fire.

Thankful for the chance to finally eat something, I sat down, impatiently blowing on the hot stew to cool it down.

Windsom declined on eating but sat down with us as he idly looked at the fire. Once everyone had finished their meal, my father began informing us what had ensued on their side.

Virion had apparently taken Tessia and Lilia somewhere else to properly mend their injuries. The Helstea family followed him to look after their daughter, which explained why only my family was here. Elder Rinia teased that I would be able to reunite with her in a few days, which caused everyone to crack a smile.

Eventually, everyone had run out of things to chatter about idly, leaving the cave silent once again. I could tell my parents were now expecting my reply to their previous question.

Turning my gaze over to Windsom, he stared back at me, expecting the same thing. Scratching my head in a motion, that I felt had become a habit during awkward circumstances since coming to this world, I spoke up.

“Elder Rinia. Is it alright for me to speak to my parents in private?”

“Of course,” the diviner gave me a warm smile.

“What about me?” My sister chirped, still cradling my bond in her arms.

“Sorry, Ellie.” I shook my head as I headed inside the tent first.

My parents came in after me, looking a bit confused.

“Isn’t your master going to join in?” my father asked, looking back outside before closing the flap.

“There is something the two of you need to know of first.” The timbre of my voice and expression on my face silenced them from asking any more questions as they sat down in front of me.

“Before we begin, there’s something I’ve thought long and hard about telling you guys ever since coming to this world.”

Chapter 105

When Ignorance Is Bliss

There was a lingering silence following my words as my parents tried to process what I had just said.

“Coming to this world? What do you mean, Honey? You were born here... I-I don’t understand,” my mother replied as she reached out to me. She held my hands tightly, as if she was afraid I would wisp away if she didn’t.

My father, on the other hand, stared at me silently, waiting for me to continue. Taking a deep breath, I squeezed my mother’s hand and spoke with a comforting smile.

“Of course I was born here, Mom; I’m yours and Dad’s very own flesh and blood. Trust me, I remember better than anyone else when I was born,” I chuckled, arousing another confused look from my parents.

“I was transported, reborn... I’m not quite sure exactly what, but something happened and I was taken from my world and brought into this one.”

“Wai-wait a minute, Son... you’re going to have to back up—”

“Art, what are you talking about? Another world? A-are you okay? Did your master tell you this? Where is this coming from?” my mother cut in as she scooted closer, examining my head... probably for signs of a concussion.

“No, Mom. My master doesn’t know this; no one but you guys know any of this. I don’t know the correct term for this ‘phenomenon’ either. I’ve thought about this for a while but my best guess is that it’s something akin to a reincarnation,” I explained.

“Arthur, did something happen to you after they took you away? Did they hurt you in some way? Come here, let me try and heal—”

“Honey, the boy is fine. Arthur, go on,” my father encouraged, but my mother persisted.

“No, Rey, our son is not fine. He’s spouting nonsense about another world and

reincarnation. Art, let me—”

“Alice! Let the boy speak.” My father snapped in a voice I’ve never heard before, stunning both my mother and I.

So I explained...

I described the world that I came from, the role that I played there, and the relationships that I had with an excruciating amount of details to make sure that they knew I couldn’t have made this up.

Throughout it all, my parents stayed silent for the most part. My father would ask questions here and there, but his face remained expressionless. My mother, however, was obviously shaken up; her face pale, the trembling of her hands increased as my story progressed.

I couldn’t tell how much time had passed, but by the fact that I felt mild pangs of hunger in my stomach, it seemed like I had been talking for several hours.

“King Grey...” my father mumbled, running his fingers through his hair as he leaned back in his chair.

“So the fighting, your talent in magic—”

“Yeah, the ki system in my old world worked similarly to certain aspects of mana in this world,” I finished for him. “And as for the fighting... you get the idea.”

“Then ever since you were born, you were able to understand what we were saying? You remember everything?” my father asked, letting out a deep sigh.

I simply nodded in response.

“Hehe...” my mother chuckled.

My father and I both turned our gaze to her. To our surprise, my mother started laughing. My father wrapped his arm around her, but she just glanced us delusionally.

“I-I get it. This is all a joke, right? Hehe... Oh, my son. Art, you almost got us there, right Rey?” she said, smiling. However, neither of us responded and her smile faded, her eyes searched for any cues that would confirm her belief. When she couldn’t, she

grabbed my hand as she stared at me with a look of desperation.

“This is a joke... right? Arthur Leywin, tell me this is a joke. You can’t really be... some former king that died and was transported into the mind of my unborn child, right? RIGHT?”

“I... don’t know exactly what happened, but I’m not joking,” I replied, unable to look her in the eyes.

“No... No, no, no. This... No, this isn’t happening. Rey, don’t tell me you believe all of this? Our son is sick; something must’ve happened to him while he was gone — no, something definitely happened. Rey, say something! Say that our son is sick!” My mother grabbed onto my father’s arm, pulling on his sleeve as tears started rolling down her pale face.

“Honey...” Wrapping his arm around her shoulder, my father held my mother close to his chest. He looked up at me and motioned me to leave the two of them alone.

I wanted to hug my mother, tell her that I was still her son, but I couldn’t muster up the courage to do either. Opening the tent, I walked out without saying anything, leaving my parents alone.

Elder Rinia, Windsom and my sister all looked at me as I walked towards them, but the look on my face probably stopped them from asking anything. Even my pouting sister held her tongue as I sat down next to her and the slumbering Sylvie in front of the fire.

Time passed slowly, with my mind feeling like it was trying to swim through a particularly viscous syrup.

Was telling them the right decision? What did they think of me now? Did they still think of me as their son, or would they inevitably grow distant...

Noises blended together incoherently and everything besides the fire that I was staring at grew out of focus. Yet, my head immediately snapped back when the sound of the tent flap opening reached me.

My father came out of the tent, suddenly looking a lot older than before. I had expected my mother to come out right after, but my father shook his head.

“Ellie, can you stay with your mother inside the tent?” he asked, motioning for me to follow him.

“Here you go. Feel better, you poop.” My sister stuck her tongue out as she carefully handed me my bond. I couldn’t help but feel a smile tug back on my lips as I watched her skip towards the tent.

Placing Sylvie atop my head, I followed my father into the tunnel Windsom and I had arrived through. I concentrated on the sounds of our echoing footsteps until my father finally decided to speak.

“Your mother... she’s sleeping right now,” he announced with a sigh.

“Is she okay?” I kept a few steps distance from my father, watching as he idly kicked a pebble as he walked.

“She was... in quite shock, to say the least.”

“So you guys believe me?”

“Unless you’ve suddenly developed a fond taste for sick gags, you have no reason to lie to us about this. Besides, it all makes sense now: the early awakening, your brilliance as a fighter and a mage... it all makes sense,” he replied.

“Are you okay?” My eyes stayed glued to the pebble bouncing on the uneven ground.

“Of course I’m not!” my father exclaimed, turning around.

“This isn’t easy news to swallow, Arthur. All of the memories we had as a family in the past, was that all a facade of how you thought the son we wanted would’ve been? How am I supposed to act around you now? You were once technically older than me, yet you’re here now as my thirteen-year-old son!” he continued, looking at me desperately for answers. “A-And your mother... your mother nursed you as an infant! She mothered a middle-aged man thinking he was her own son!”

I stood silent, unable to reply. Everything he said was true after all. My father’s fists were clenched so tightly that blood was dripping between his fingers. His expression was ghastly; from the trembling frown on his face to his furrowed brows, his emotions were clearly visible on his face. Fear, anxiousness, frustration, and confusion... they were all there.

"I'm sorry, but are you really our son, Arthur? Or did you take over the unborn baby that would've been our son during your reincarnation, or whatever it is that happened to you!" He blurted. His eyes widened immediately as he covered his mouth with his hand.

"I-I didn't mean that," he stammered. Letting out a deep breath, he whispered, "I'm sorry, Arthur... I'm just very confused right now."

"Like I said earlier... the truth is, I really don't know. I don't know who or what brought me to this world, and why it did. You're right, Da... Reynolds. I could've killed the fetus inside... I don't know how this 'process' that brought me here works," I stated coolly, swallowing back something particularly hard in my throat.

He winced when I addressed him as Reynolds and was about to say something, but just closed his mouth.

"I didn't want to keep hiding this from you guys, but now I'm questioning whether I made the right choice," I murmured, letting out a dry laugh.

"This is what I wanted to tell you guys for so long, but never had the courage to. I wanted to say this before I left."

"Left? You're leaving?" my father responded.

"Yeah, and I think that under the current circumstances, it'll be good to spend some time apart," I went on, a certain aloof edge filling my voice involuntarily.

"...How long will you be gone?" My father asked.

"At least a few years."

"That long, huh?" he replied as he stared down, no sign of him stopping me or forbidding me to go.

Turning around, my chest was aching and my head was throbbing with an intensity I had never experienced before. Humans... no matter how powerful we could potentially be, we were still so fragile.

"You know, I never had any memories of family in my old world. Growing up in an environment where no one truly loved me, and in turn, being calloused and distant to everyone made me an unrivaled fighter, but a crappy person. Ever since coming to this

world, the two of you, and later Ellie, taught me something I had never known. I may not be the strongest fighter or mage in this world, but I'm a hell of a better person now than I ever would've been in my previous life. I'm sorry for the hurt I caused. Thank you for making me a better man... and thank you for loving me as your son." Still with my back facing my father, I headed back to where Windsom was. I simply walked on, hearing the muffled sobs of my father as he stayed behind, I struggled to keep my own tears in as well.

I got back to the main cave to see Windsom and Rinia discussing something. Elder Rinia was holding onto something wrapped in a blanket, and I could've sworn that it moved, but I chose to ignore it. Windsom had just taken his hand off whatever was bundled inside the blanket and noticed me approaching.

"I see you've wrapped things up. Are you ready?" Windsom's glittering eyes studied my expression carefully as he got up.

"Yeah, let's go."

"Wait, aren't you going to say goodbye to your family?" Rinia chimed, setting down the blanket carefully on her seat.

"No need. I've already sorted out everything I needed to here. I leave them in your care." I gave her a curt bow and was about to follow after Windsom when Rinia grabbed me. Her eyes glowed with a mysterious hue as I silently waited for her to speak when she suddenly placed her hands on my cheeks.

"Arthur, please. Your expression is frightening, it is unbecoming of someone as kind hearted as you. I can only begin to understand the gravity of the upcoming battles that lay ahead of you, but do not fall back to your old ways. You know best that the deeper you go into that pit, the harder it will be to climb back out," she said as her eyes faded back to normal. Slapping my cheeks gently, she turned me around and nudged me towards Windsom.

"Now go. I'll take care of things here," she said with a soft smile.

Windsom retrieved a disk-like object far too large to fit in his pocket and dropped it on the ground. Then, the asura pricked his finger and let a drop of his blood fall on the disk. Immediately, it expanded and shot out a column of light that reached the ceiling.

My mind was still on what Rinia had just said when I turned around to Windsom and

asked, “Was there something wrong with my expression?”

“Your expression reminded me of the Pantheon Asuras of Epheotus. They are a race of fine warriors that have learned to close off their emotions in order to fight with the most efficiency. A very useful technique indeed,” Windsom nodded in approval. “Now, let us go. Are you sure you have tied your loose ends here? I need your full concentration once we’re in Epheotus.”

I glanced at the cave one last time before taking a deep breath.

“I’m ready.”

Hugging Sylvie tighter in my arms, I accepted Windsom’s hand as we stepped into the column of golden light.

Chapter 106

Logic's Biggest Foe

REYNOLDS LEYWIN'S POV:

I hated myself for what had happened. A part of me wished I had told Arthur that it was okay... that he was still family.

But a bigger part of me, the part that I hated, wished he would've just never told us.

I had known since early on in Arthur's life that he was different. He had always been much more composed and mature for his age, and even when he acted his age, it seemed... rehearsed. Since early on, his actions always displayed a certain sense of foresight; there was always a reason he did something, a goal or plan of some kind.

Maybe due to that, I was so caught up on his reason for telling us this. Wouldn't it have been better for everyone, even for himself, if he had kept it a secret? What was the reason? What was his goal?

Why was it so hard for me to accept this? Was it because it went against my own pride? My own selfish pride that maybe, just maybe, I had sired and raised a genius that only came once in a millennium?

The signs were always there. His strange behavior from an early age, his unexplainable prowess as a swordsman and talents as a mage.

Again... Did I subconsciously choose to ignore all of those signs so I can maintain my petty ego? Deciding just to accept the fact that that my own flesh and blood, my... son, could be so bloody impressive.

I couldn't help but laugh at myself at how difficult it was to say 'son', such a simple term of endearment.

It took me a while to drag my sorry feet back to the cave. Looking around, the only one I could see was Elder Rinia, who was cradling something by the fire. I glanced at the tent my wife and daughter was in, but for some reason I couldn't bring myself to go

inside. Instead, I sat down next to our benefactor.

“He left, you know.” The aged elf’s eyes remained glued to the bundle of blankets she was cradling in her arms as she spoke.

“I figured,” I sighed, feeling like a child being scolded.

“I was afraid of the day when he would tell you.”

“Y-you knew, Elder Rinia?” I peeled my eyes off of the fire and turned to the elf seated next to me.

“I see many things, but only for that boy do I have to grind my old head to try and piece together what is in store for him.” She met my gaze, her eyes dim with weariness.

“Heh, he’s hardly a boy,” I scoffed, leaning forward as I got lost in the flames dancing in front of me.

“Bah! He’s still a child to me, much like how you’re still a child as well,” Elder Rinia chortled back. Leaning back carefully in her seat, she continued. “I always found it amusing... the preconceptions people have about age and intelligence: The older someone is, the more wisdom he or she should possess, and the more intelligent someone is, the more logical he or she should be. Pair those two traits up, and the intelligent senior should be some cold, calculating shrewd... don’t you agree?”

Noticing my puzzled expression, she revealed a soft smile and gently set down the bundle she was holding and leaned closer to me.

“Do you see me as a cold, calculating shrewd?” The aged elf gave me a wink.

“No, of course not. But... I don’t get what this has to do with Arthur,” I stammered back, caught off guard.

“Weren’t you wishing Arthur would’ve just kept his mouth shut? That you would feel better ignorant of who the boy really is? I bet you were also wondering why the boy told you in the first place, right?”

Before I had the opportunity to reply, the aged elf poked me softly in the chest... right where my heart was.

“The heart remains the brain’s biggest foe. Well actually, for men, the brain’s most formidable foe is probably...” Elder Rinia’s gaze dropped below my waist. When I realized where she was referring to, my immediate instinct was to cross my legs, but I soon found myself laughing alongside the old elf.

Elder Rinia straightened up and continued. “As I was saying, emotion—the heart—constantly clashes against things like validity, efficiency, utility... anything logical. That’s what gets us hurt or even killed, yet, we can’t seem to help it. It makes us lesser as an individual, but greater as a group.”

“So... Arthur was running more on emotion than logic when he told us this?”

“Bah! How could I know what he’s thinking?” She shook her head, “I do know this, though. I’ve known the boy since he was a mere toddler in this world and he’s come a long way since then. Much of that cold shell of his has slowly melted. Perhaps his ‘coming out’ was a large step he had to take to break out of that shell he once found safety and comfort in.”

Elder Rinia got up and stretched painfully before handing me the bundle of sheets she had been cradling. “Hold on to this for me so that I can prepare some food for your wife. I suspect she won’t have much of an appetite but she still needs to care for her body.”

“Thank you, Elder. What is this, anyway?” I bowed slightly before asking.

“Arthur’s master only told me it was a gift for the Leywin family.” There was a mysterious grin on her face causing me to be helplessly curious as to what it could be.

After carefully peeling away the layer of blankets, I couldn’t help but gape.

It was a mana beast, an infant mana beast to be more precise. The small bear-like creature was dark brown except for two dark spots above its eyes that made the beast look like it was scowling and a tuft of white fur on its chest.

“Awww! So cute! Papa, what is it? Can I keep it?” Ellie’s sudden exclamation startled me, nearly making me drop the mana beast.

“Honey, you scared me! And, I’m not sure if”—just then, the mana beast woke up and locked eyes with my daughter—“it’s a good idea...”

My voice trailed off as both my daughter and the beast's eyes began glowing a faint gold. I sat still, witnessing what I could only assume to be the bonding process. I had yet to bond with a mana beast, but both Arthur and Ellie now have.

I sighed to myself, bitterly acknowledging the fact that it would be better for my daughter to have a bond to protect her as the image of me riding atop a mighty bear mana beast into battle slowly crumbled.

The glow subsided from both their eyes as a gold insignia imprinted itself onto my daughter's right collar bone.

The bear-like mana beast stretched out its arms, as if wanting to be picked up by Ellie, and let out a soft whine.

"Hehe! I'll name you Boo," my daughter giggled as she picked up the mana beast.

"B-Boo?" I sputtered, imagining the ferocious mana beast it'll grow up to be being called something so cute.

"Yup! Because the black spots make him look like he's always mad! So, Boo!" she declared.

"Let's go help out Grandma, Boo!" My daughter skipped off, just to stop and turn around. "Oh, right! Papa, Mama is awake."

I immediately got out of my seat and made my way to the tent. Elder Rinia's tent was much larger inside than it appeared to be from the outside. Quietly stepping into our room that was separated by another flap, I smiled when I saw my wife sitting up.

"How are you feeling?" I gently asked, taking a seat next to her.

"How long have I been sleeping for?" she groaned, rubbing her temples.

"Only for a few hours." I put my arm around her and pulled her close so she could rest her head on my shoulder.

"W-Where's Arthur? Is he... gone?"

"Yeah." I held her tightly as she began trembling.

“Am I a terrible person, Rey?” she sniffed.

“No, you’re not. Why would you ask that?”

“I-I called Arthur sick. I didn’t take him seriously when he told us his secret... I didn’t want to take it seriously!” She looked up at me, the corner of her eyes filled with tears.

“That’s normal. I wouldn’t trust anyone who could easily accept what Arthur had told us,” I consoled, gently running my fingers through her hair.

“Then am I a terrible person for doubting whether Arthur is our son?”

“ ... ”

I wanted to tell her no, but how could I when I called myself terrible for thinking the exact same thing? The pain and hurt I’ve been feeling ever since learning the truth about Arthur was from the selfish desires and dreams I placed on the child I called my son. Alice was the one who actually birthed Arthur. She went through the stress, discomfort and pain of pregnancy for nine months before enduring the agony of labor. She nursed him, fed him, took care of him when he was sick and taught him the ways of this world. Now, everything she knew about the child turned out to be a lie...

I bit my quivering lip, trying to keep silent.

I needed to be the strong one...

I needed to be the one that my wife could rely on...

“I’m sorry,” my wife suddenly whispered. Her head was still leaning against my shoulder so I couldn’t tell what sort of expression she had.

“You did nothing to be sorry about, Honey. We... we just need time to sort out our feelings. Arthur knew this, which was why he told us before he had to leave.”

“How long will he be gone for?” she asked. I might’ve been hearing wrong, but my wife’s voice sounded somewhat brusque as she asked.

“He said a few years,” I replied, expecting Alice to be surprised. Instead, she gave me a slight nod as she muttered, “I see.”

“Alice, what’s wrong?” I pulled my wife an arms length away, trying to get a better look at her face. Her eyes were dull, almost lifeless, as she refused to make eye contact with me.

“I wonder what our son would’ve been like if Arthur hadn’t taken over?” she mumbled looking at the ground.

“A-Alice... please don’t say that. Don’t ask something like that,” I said, my voice coming out in a sort of whimper.

“Would he have been courageous and outgoing like you? Or maybe he would’ve been a bit more careful and shy like me...” she continued, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“H-Honey, don’t. Just don’t...” Tears began rolling down my face despite doing all I could to steady my voice. “Arthur is... Arthur...”

“Arthur is what? Our son?” My wife met my eyes and I could see how desperate she was... how lost she was. “If you haven’t noticed, Rey, not once have we referred to Arthur as our son since we started talking!”

I specifically remembered opening my mouth, trying to refute, but no argument came out; no sound, no words... only silence.

I took a deep breath and wiped the tears off of my wife’s face before speaking. “Just as it is for you, It’s hard for me to confidently call Arthur our son. Hopefully, that’ll change the next time we see him, but Alice, it doesn’t change the fact that we have considered him family for over thirteen years now. We laughed, we fought, we celebrated, we shed tears together. Isn’t that what brought us close? Not the blood running through us, not who we once were in the past, but what we went through together?”

Embracing my wife tightly, I continued talking. “Remember when Arthur sacrificed his life for you in the mountains on our way to Xyrus? He did that expecting to die that day. You know very well he wouldn’t have done something like that if he didn’t consider you important. So don’t dwell on the ‘what if’s and let’s try to accept what’s happening around us.”

I could feel my wife trembling in my arms as she broke down and cried. I now remembered where I recognized that dull, lifeless look Alice had in her eyes. It was the same look she carried after we thought Arthur had died. It was her trying to escape reality.

We sat there for a while in each other's arms until our tears ran dry and our sobs were reduced to soft whimpers.

"Alice, you're not a horrible person. Believe me, I've thought worse than you. But it is going to take us time to wrap our heads around this..." My voice trailed off as I held my wife's face and gazed deeply, studying every detail of the woman I loved.

"S-stop staring. I must look disgusting right now," she croaked, her voice hoarse from crying.

"You're beautiful," I stated while staring at her puffy red eyes and runny nose.

My wife softly closed her eyes and leaned forward. I pressed my lips gently against hers when Ellie's voice rang just outside the tent.

"Mama! Are you feeling better now? Let me show you Boo!"

"Now now, come play with Grandma. Your parents are... resting, yes resting!" Elder Rinia's voice rang just outside the tent as well.

"Aww, okay. Come on, Boo. Let's play with Grandma!"

Alice and I locked eyes in what felt like a long time and she finally smiled.

"What is this 'Boo' that Ellie is talking about?" my wife asked, raising a brow.

"I'll tell you later." Shooting her what I supposed to be a wink with my swollen eyes, I wiped another stray tear from her face and resumed where we had left off.

Chapter 107

A Grudging Tolerance

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

I wasn't sure what I was expecting out of a land inhabited by beings that were basically considered gods to us. For some reason, in my imagination, grand and fantastical lands were always constructed out of gold, diamonds or some other precious material.

In my old world, even the homes of the most influential figures were designed with the intention of practicality more than anything else. The most important figures were mostly warriors after all, and our tastes were rather simple. Things like furniture made from the hides of precious beasts were unnecessary and only sought after by the rich merchants and politicians whose sense of self-worth were directly proportional to their wealth.

Thus, exiting from the golden column of light and stepping into the realm of asuras could only leave me wide-eyed and breathless.

My mood was sour and I was still wallowing in regret over the recent decision I had made, but one glance at the land Sylvia and Windsom had come from was all it took for me to temporarily forget about my troubles and future hardships I would have to endure.

It felt as if I had been transported to a different planet; a planet where it wasn't the inhabitants that had constructed the buildings and manors, but one where the earth and land forged itself to be worthy enough to be resided in.

The towering castle in front of us seemed to have been birthed from the earth itself as there were neither signs nor indications that it had been shaped or molded. Sophisticated designs and runes made from what looked like precious minerals covered the walls of the castle that stood high enough to be seen from kilometers away. The trees bent and tangled together in arches to create a corridor that led to the entrance atop a bridge, shimmering in an array of translucent colors.

Peeling my eyes off the castle itself took a great effort, the iridescent bridge was no

easier, but I was finally able to at least collect myself enough to take in my surroundings.

Windsom had transported us on top of a mountain cluttered with trees that reminded me of cherry blossoms. The familiar trees were in full bloom, with shimmering pink petals that seemed to dance as they floated down to the ground. The vibrant bridge that stretched out in front of us led to another mountain of which the castle seemed to have been carved from. Evidently, the mountain was pretty high up as the clouds covered everything underneath the bridge, with two mountain peaks that stuck out like two islands in an ocean of hazy white.

“Welcome to Epheotus, or more specifically, the Indrath Clan’s castle.” Windsom walked towards the castle, stepping on the bridge of precious minerals that any mortal king would wage wars for, before glancing back and beckoning me to follow.

Taking a deep breath, I trailed behind the asura, carefully placing my right foot on top of the incandescent surface of the bridge. The bridge was semi-translucent like stained glass... As I stepped on the structure, a deep feeling of fear washed over me, which was a surprise since I have never had a fear of heights. It might’ve been due to the fact that there were no supports holding up the bridge that easily spanned a couple hundred feet.

“Indrath Clan? You mean we’re at the home of Sylvia’s family?” I asked. I had decided to trust in the colorful bridge rather than imagine what would happen if it were to abruptly break. Walking alongside Windsom, we made our way towards the castle.

“Yes. Lord Indrath had commanded that I bring you and Lady Sylvie to him upon arrival,” the asura replied. I found it amusing seeing the usually cool and aloof Windsom smoothing out the creases on his robe anxiously.

“Any last tips before meeting this almighty lord of lords?”

“Unfortunately, even I do not know what to expect; this situation is rather peculiar after all,” he answered, tidying his hair.

Letting out a sigh, I glanced down at Sylvie sleeping in my arms. I was beginning to grow worried by how much she slept, the only thing comforting me being her rhythmic breathing.

The doors to the monstrous castle were just as proportionately terrifying. They were

tall, not just to a thirteen-year-old boy, but tall enough to admit giants and... well... dragons.

“There aren’t any guards or watchmen?” I asked, looking around the open doors.

“Of course there are. They were watching us while we were crossing over the bridge. Now come, we shouldn’t keep Lord Indrath waiting.”

As I stepped off the bridge and into the castle, the feeling of angst went away, instead I was drenched in cold sweat at the realization that it wasn’t the height of the bridge that had scared me but whoever, or whatever, had been watching me as we crossed it.

The interior of the castle didn’t disappoint as it was just as magnificently crafted as the outside. Ceilings were unnecessarily high with arches that looked to have been carved out of the mountain. The walls themselves were adorned with intricate detailing, as if they told a story. Yet, considering how large the castle was, it was eerily quiet.

“This way. The Indrath Clan is waiting for you.” Windsom seemed to be on edge as he kept fixing some part of his attire while we walked.

“Wait, the entire clan is waiting for us?”

“Yes, now please, let us hurry,” the asura sighed, as he went ahead of me into a particularly intimidating corridor.

Again, shivers ran down my spine, but this time, I was able to see the source. At the end of the corridor, were two figures guarding the door. I wasn’t able to make out much of their appearance as they were shrouded in darkness from the shadows cast by the corridor’s lights. However, my instincts had already kicked in, desperately trying to convince me to run as far away as possible from these two shadowed figures.

I was reminded of the time I was in front of the Elderwood Guardian, however, I had a feeling that in front of those guards, the S class mana beast that I almost died to would only be cannon fodder.

Windsom and I eventually approached them. Reaching the door, I was now able to discern the two guards’ features. One was a female with an amiable expression on her face. She looked rather tomboyish with her green hair cut short to just underneath her ear, but the distinct curves noticeable below her light leather armor showed

otherwise. The man next to her looked much fiercer, with sharp eyes and a scar that jaggedly cut across his cheek. The only visible weapon I noticed on either of them was a short dagger strapped to each of their waists.

“Elder Windsom. I see you finally brought the human boy,” the female guard grinned. The male guard stared at Sylvie and looked up at me in a studying gaze. “Is it appropriate for a human child to be carrying the Princess?” he asked disapprovingly.

“Let it be, Signiz. They are bonded,” Windsom dismissed. “Now... are you guys going to let us in or not?”

The two guards looked at each other briefly before giving Windsom a brief nod. As the two of them faced the door, the aura they emitted increased significantly, enough for it to be nearly palpable. Only a few seconds had passed but beads of cold sweat rolled down my face as my breathing became shallow and jagged.

The two guards each held onto one of the door handles and pulled it open. I could only imagine how heavy it was since the two guards were struggling to pry it apart. Finally, with a loud clack, the towering door slid open, revealing what I assumed to be the Great Hall... and staring right at me, seated on a blazing white throne, was a man who looked to be no older than twenty.

Windsom immediately stepped past me into the room and knelt.

“My Lord,” the asura addressed, bowing his head. Lord Indrath wasn’t what I had expected him to be like in the least. He had a cool, almost mellow feel to him, sporting a silvery cream-colored hair that was neither long nor short. He would be considered an attractive man by any means, but he wasn’t exceptionally stunning either. I couldn’t really tell what his build was underneath his white robe but he didn’t look particularly robust. His eyes reminded me too much of Sylvia for my comfort, but while Sylvia’s eyes were still compassionate, his were hard. Lord Indrath’s eyes were purple as well, but even from here, I could see the colors change shades.

Realizing that I had been staring for far too long, I followed suit and knelt as well. While my head was down, though, I couldn’t help but peek around the room. Standing to the side of the great hall were figures of all ages and sizes staring at me, some disdainful like the prior male guard, while others with simple curiosity.

Each of the figures that were standing around Windsom and I emanated auras that

would make even the most powerful mages in Dicathen faint and froth in the mouth, yet, the man seated on the throne that burned in a shimmering white fire emitted none. Even after trying to consciously sense him, I couldn't even feel his presence. Even with the fact that I was able to see him, I had trouble believing he actually existed if my eyes weren't directly focused on him.

"Stand." His voice soft and silvery, yet sharp like a knife in a way that it was both gentle and imposing. Rising to our feet, we walked towards the throne, with Sylvie still in my arms. I could feel the eyes of everyone following me, judging my every movement. I was reminded of when I was still an orphan fetching groceries for our house at a nearby market. It felt much like how the adults looked at me then, the glares and blatant disgust as if I was some sort of disease that they needed to avoid.

Seconds slowly ticked by as we waited for the man on the throne to speak, yet he only stared wordlessly at me and Sylvie with an expression I couldn't interpret. Without warning, my stomach and left arm started burning furiously. I hurriedly pulled up my sleeve and removed Silvia's silky feather to see that the insignia glowing hotly. I hadn't removed my clothes but from the dimmed glow underneath my shirt, it was easy to guess that my sternum was also glowing.

The asura, seated atop the throne, let out a sigh and gave a dismissive nod in a way that gestured reluctant resignation.

My eyes hadn't left Lord Indrath as he had been studying me so when I felt Sylvie in my arms suddenly disappear and reappear in his arms, my immediate reaction was a clumsy and baffled astonishment.

"What the?!" I spouted. I reflexively tried to reach out for my bond until Windsom placed his hand on my shoulder.

"What. Am I not allowed to hold my own granddaughter?" Lord Indrath retorted, holding Sylvie in one hand. Lifting her up so he was eye-level, Lord Indrath turned her around while inspecting every angle of my sleeping bond.

"I see you have done nothing to train her. Her mana levels are insultingly low, and by how she's in a hibernating state right now, it seemed that you had strained her." Lord Indrath's eyes narrowed and pierced through me, only my pride keeping me from taking a step back.

“My apologies, My Lord. I should have trained Lady Sylvie while I was in Dicathen. If it is to your liking, I can start her training now as well.” To my surprise, Windsom had defended me, bowing once again in front of the creamy-haired man on the throne.

“No need. I will personally look after... Sylvie,” Lord Indrath dismissed, shaking his head. With that, a wave of surprised gasps and soft murmurs filled the great hall as the other members of the Indrath Clan whispered to one another excitedly.

Placing a finger gently between Sylvie’s eyes, Lord Indrath mouthed something inaudibly. His eyes glowed, and suddenly Sylvie jolted awake, her eyes glimmering in the same shade of purple as her grandfather’s.

“Kyu?” ‘Papa? Where am I?’

The nostalgic voice that I hadn’t heard in days filled my head. Sylvie was obviously confused by the unfamiliar scene and by the fact that a man she had never seen was holding her so intimately.

‘We’ve come a bit far away, Sylv. How are you feeling?’ I transmitted back, a smile forming on my face.

‘Sleepy~ Can I go back to sleep, Papa?’ I could see Sylvie’s eyes struggling to stay open as she blinked wearily before fully closing.

“Lord Indrath. Win... Elder Windsom had already explained to me what is needed of me, but he has yet to fill me in on why exactly I was to be brought here. If it is simply for training purposes, isn’t some remote dungeon in Dicathen a suitable place?” I asked, impatiently waiting for him to hand me back my bond.

“I have deemed you a necessary piece that will help us against Agrona and his army. I take it that you have already understood the mutual benefit in winning the approaching war, yes? Having said that, it will be the most beneficial to have several specialists to help Windsom in training you during your stay here. Think of it as an honor since only the most talented of the younger generations would get the training that you will get.”

“How will you know when the war will be approaching? How much time do we even have?” There were way too many uncertainties for me to be able to comfortably train.

“That is for me to worry about. Focus on your training and I will notify Windsom when

it is time for you to go back to your homeland. That is all,” Lord Indrath replied, signaling to Windsom to take me away.

“Wait, what about Sylvie?”

“She will stay with me until her training is over,” he said matter-of-factly.

“What? How long will that take? I won’t be able to see her until then?”

Lord Indrath’s brow twitched impatiently as he simply shooed us away with his hand. Before I could respond, Windsom squeezed my arm tightly, dragging me out of the great hall.

After passing the two guards I angrily shook my hand out of Windsom’s grasp. “What was even the point of that meeting? I went in there to have Sylvie snatched away and be looked down on by all of the Indrath Clan? That was humiliating!”

Letting out a sigh, Windsom replied, “The relationship between you and the asuras is very peculiar and could only be summed up as... let’s say... a grudging tolerance. The very fact that we have no choice but to rely on a lesser being is a wound on our pride. Do not worry, both you and Lady Sylvie will not be mistreated. Like Lord Indrath had mentioned, you are important to us.”

“I’m pretty sure he said ‘necessary piece,’” I scoffed, stepping back onto the bridge we previously crossed.

Windsom’s lips curled into a faint smile. “Come, there are some people I want you to meet.”

Chapter 108

Ones Closest To Gods

“No! I said left foot out at a forty-degree angle. Your center of gravity should be aligned with your right heel since that is your pivot foot, do you understand, stray?” The instructor had just cracked his whip to get me in proper position as he went around the class.

Gritting my teeth, I silently obeyed, adjusting my left foot to comply with my instructor’s imperfect technique. If I hadn’t, it would only mean a delay in whatever scraps of dinner we were given since we weren’t to be fed until everyone had perfectly gone through the stances and forms from the day’s lessons.

Days at this “institution” had consisted of eight hours of combat training, of which I found somewhat flawed, then meditation to nurture our ki centers for around ten hours after. The remaining six hours were split amongst the daily necessities of eating, washing and sleeping. Students whose centers had developed enough to learn ki techniques were separated from the rest of the group and placed into specialty classes depending on their aptitudes.

Those that were not able to awaken their ki centers were to be “relocated”, of which I had later realised that it really meant ‘to be disposed of’. For me, I had followed the instructor’s training regimen to the bone for the allotted eight hours. During the time given for meditation, I would sleep for the remaining two hours after actually only meditating for the first eight, using the actual time we were given to sleep to unlearn all of the garbage that the instructors had regarded as martial arts and train in my own techniques.

The only useful information that the instructors had taught us were the vital spots of a human body; the weak points to target for certain death. Their techniques were a brutish, senseless way of trying inflict damage to those areas regardless of how the opponent might react. They taught in a way where, as long as one follows the proper steps, the user will be able to reach their target and inflict pain onto them. Like I said... senseless.

I hid the fact that my ki center had been cultivated enough to learn ki techniques for

as long as possible since I knew that once I had advanced to the higher level classes, it would give me less time to train on my own. My one stroke of luck at that time, I admit, had been stumbling upon a ki technique book for hiding the user's presence. I absorbed the words in that book like it was fresh water in a barren desert. The technique manual was a low grade one, but I had practiced the technique to such a degree that it provided me with the ability to sneak into the private library where they held all of the ki techniques.

Thinking back on it now, I probably wasn't that tall in my previous life due to the fact that I had only slept for eight to ten hours a week because of how much time I had spent reading and practicing the techniques. I knew it would've been useless for me to try and learn all of the techniques, so I had narrowed it down and studied only the ki arts that would most benefit me in the long run.

I'd realized, while the library had been secured, it wasn't really heavily guarded; the reason being that, even if a student were to have trespassed inside, they wouldn't have been able to figure out on their own how to learn those techniques. Much like the manual I had stumbled upon for hiding the user's presence, the other ki technique manuals had been filled with terms and jargon that no orphaned child or teenager would've known anyway.

That means, all I had to go off on were the crudely drawn pictures that showed the necessary steps in learning and using the ki art.

It didn't strike me then, but reflecting back on it now, it would've been easy to discern that I was nothing short of a prodigy. Just by studying the pictures of the man (I'll name the man Joe.) demonstrating the steps for the ki art, I was able to grasp how the ki was supposed to flow inside my body to properly execute the technique.

The first ki art I had learned after breaking into the library was a series of ki enhanced footwork techniques that I had practiced to the point where you could almost see the bones on the soles of my feet. The technique looked like a tap dance sequence without proper ki flow, but once I had managed to input the proper flow of ki into the appropriate appendages at the appropriate time, I was able to evade, reposition, sneak behind, basically teleport within a limited range.

I still remember using that very ki art, the technique I mastered and fine-tuned to pseudo-perfection, to defeat the same instructor that had whipped me so many times for no apparent reason other than to satisfy his sadistic tendencies.

The look on his face when I had my wooden sword pressed against his sweating neck, I can still vividly recall. His wide, astonished eyes shaking as his mouth hung agape trying to string together words to form a petty and convenient excuse that would allow him to save some face.

Even as I was on the road to become King, the foot technique that I had mastered and made my own left me with nicknames like Untouchable, GodSpeed, Mirage, etc.

However, upon arriving into this world, there was little use for such movements once my mana core had advanced enough. I was hardly within range to use the moves that I had once relied so heavily on and it seemed so much simpler to just conjure a wall to block whatever projectiles hurled towards me. With mana being so abundant and all, I had never needed to regulate and control my mana output.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ Present ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

It's amusing how the human brain recalls moments of the past. All the memories that the person wishes to forget is somehow ingrained even deeper into the hippocampus.

This seemingly ancient memory of my previous childhood had been suddenly evoked as my life flashed before my eyes; at the same time a simple low sweep from my opponent's kick shattered both of my legs simultaneously. As I collapsed onto the ground, I failed to dodge another sharp jab that dislocated my right shoulder. I was all but defenseless as I shifted glanced between the man who had overwhelmed me to such an enormous degree and my severed left arm that he had in his hand.

Windsom had told me that the pain felt in this domain was greatly diminished. If that was truly the case, how much more agonizing would these wounds be if it had actually happened to me?

The one responsible for my current mortal injuries approached me with a mixed expression, giving me a terse nod as he snapped his fingers. "Enough," he announced as the world faded into black. And, like that, I was awake again with all of my limbs attached and unbroken.

I immediately crumpled to all fours and hurled the remainder of my last meal as I heaved for breath. My vomit immediately dissipated in the small sapphire pond I had been meditating in. I wasn't sure if I was wet because of the magical liquid that I was

surrounded in or the profuse amount of sweat and grime that I had discharged from the stress.

“No, let me continue,” I managed to choke out in between gasps.

“The human boy has admirable willpower. How much time has passed, Windsom?” the same deep and controlled voice came from the one that had broken most of the 206 bones in my body, asking calmly.

“About five minutes have passed out here,” Windsom said tersely.

“So roughly an hour has passed for us in there.” The lean man with a shaved head remarked in a way that was neither disappointed nor proud, just matter-of-factly. I regarded the two asuras’ conversation with a weary curiosity while wiping vomit off of my lips.

“Again,” I demanded desperately, sitting back up in the meditative posture, that Windsom had taught me, in the middle of this sacred pool.

The asura with the shaved head nodded approvingly and sat down facing me in the exact same position as I was in and traded glances with Windsom, signaling for him to start.

Once again, the glowing sapphire liquid rose up around us and enveloped the asura and myself. I was soon engulfed in the familiar scorching sensation that had overwhelmed me the last few dozen times we did this, and again, my vision had darkened as I waited anxiously for the both of us to reappear in the hell that is the mental training facility where I had just been dismembered.

My thoughts slowly trailed back a few hours before all of this, when we had just left the Indrath Clan’s castle.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Upset would be a mild way of describing my state of mind after Lord Indrath had decided that I wasn’t fit to see or even communicate with my own bond during the period of our stay. He made it explicitly clear that my presence would hinder the progress of Sylvie’s recovery and training.

It was an odd feeling being separated so entirely from Sylvie. Usually, even when my bond was sleeping, I would still feel her presence. Suddenly having that yanked away again, just like that time in the Widow's Crypt dungeon, made me feel empty, almost as if a limb had been pulled off.

"Come, there are some people I want you to meet," the asura paused and then went on. "Well, just one person specifically, for now."

Even after crossing the bridge, Windsom did little to explain the location of our training grounds, keeping mostly silent as we scaled down the steep mountain. As we climbed down, the atmosphere drastically changed. Color was lost as we were surrounded by a dreary canvas of grey stones and rotten wood. The sea of clouds that seemed so far down was now just above us, and it seemed that the layer of haze was the border between heaven and what felt like purgatory.

We must've intentionally trekked down the steepest side of the mountain since we were vertically climbing down most of the time. Windsom had vaguely explained to me how the use of mana arts to venture down was forbidden; something to do with tradition and being worthy. Because of this tradition, the journey that would have taken us minutes elongated into hours.

"We're here," Windsom announced evenly with no sign of fatigue inside this zone of increased pressure and low air density. He was staring intently at a dead root that jutted out of the crevice between two stones.

"We're going to train here?" I muttered in between breaths, staring at the insignificant root that Windsom seemed so fixated on.

"Hold on to my hand," he replied, ignoring my question as he reached out towards me.

As soon as I had a grip on his hand, the asura yanked me towards him, swinging me towards where the root was stuck. Before I even had the time to yell out in surprise, however, the scene changed and I was in some sort of small cave, the same cave that I was in now.

Windsom appeared behind me shortly after, and took the lead, heading towards the glowing pool that I had been indiscreetly staring at.

"It's good to see you again, Kordri," Windsom suddenly greeted to no one in particular.

“It is nice seeing you as well, Elder Windsom. And you must be the human, Arthur Leywin, correct?” Just then, a figure that I could’ve sworn was not there before suddenly appeared right in front of us. It was the same shaven and lean asura that had been sitting in front of me throughout the training.

This man was by no means distinguishable or remarkable in any way. He reminded me of a monk; someone who had chosen to let go of worldly matters, except he wasn’t dressed in a robe but a light, tight-fitting tunic. The only unique features he had were his four hazel eyes, but even that fact seemed to be somehow plain. Every one of his four eyes exuded a calm wisdom that differed from Lord Indrath’s silently terrifying gaze.

“Yes, nice to meet you,” I replied after quickly regaining my composure.

“Arthur, this is my close friend, Kordri. He is of the Thyestes Clan of the Pantheon asura race just like Aldir, who you met back at the floating castle in Dicathen,” Windsom introduced. He had taught me about the eight asura races and the affiliated Great Clans. The Pantheon race was the only race of asura that was versed in what I coined as force-type mana art.

The Basilisk race, the race that the Vritra clan was from, was the only race that was capable of decay-type mana art. The remaining six asura races, including the Dragon race that Lord Indrath, Sylvia, and Windsom are a part of, hold distinct creation-type mana art.

While the Dragon race are feared for the aether mana art that is so unique and mysterious, it is still considered creation-type. Of course the asuras’ terms for creation, neutral, and decay type mana arts differ for each race but I just standardized it for my own ease.

There was no time for us to go over the special qualities each race held since that was when we had arrived at Elder Rinia’s home, but I had a feeling I would be learning it later on.

“Has Lord Indrath truly granted you the aether orb?” Kordri’s even voice snapped me out of my train of thought as he peered anxiously at Windsom.

“Yes, it is right here.” Windsom then took out a spherical object the size of his palm, revealing it to Kordri.

“Lord Indrath is truly investing much into this human,” he sighed, admiring the orb.

Windsom looked back to meet my eyes, giving me an “I told you so” gaze before turning back.

“Arthur, come and sit here with us. I’ll explain to you how your training will begin.” Kordri motioned for me with his hand as he sat down.

“Windsom speculated that it would be best for your training to start with me instead of of him because of a few reasons. First, your body and mana core are not nearly strong enough to handle the sort of training that even young asuras are capable of. If resources were not readily available at our disposal, it would take you at least a few decades in order for you to physically absorb anything taught by us.” The asura named Kordri looked at the orb in Windsom’s hand before continuing. “Fortunately, we have the aether orb.”

“What exactly is this aether orb?” I knew he was expecting me to ask this.

“Arthur, you may not know this, but the Dragon race is regarded as the asura race deemed closest to being gods. Yes, actual gods. The reason being that we hold the ability to manipulate aether. Aether is a material, that flows throughout the entire universe. As you know from receiving Lady Sylvia’s will, aether contains the power to manipulate even time and space itself, aptly shown in your recent experience with Lord Indrath. Much of the possibilities of aether remain incomprehensible to even the Indrath Clan, but one artifact that has remained in our possession since the beginning of our clan’s history is the aether orb. The aether orb is a treasure that had allowed our clan to gain glimpses of the power that aether holds. One being the ability to separate the body from the soul.” Windsom regarded the orb with an almost reverence as he tenderly held onto it.

“The orb also has the power to manipulate time. With these two abilities that the aether orb has, The efficiency of your training would be at a rate that should have be impossible otherwise. Because of the close relationship between the Thyestes Clan and Indrath Clan, Lord Indrath had at one point gifted us with the temporary usage of this treasure,” Kordri continued for Windsom.

“Remember me telling you that Lord Indrath has placed a significant amount of resources into making sure you will be ready for the upcoming battles? Along with the orb, Lord Indrath has allowed us the use of his exclusive training grounds. The aether-

rich liquid inside that pond will help accelerate your training and heal wounds that you will incur throughout this process. Kordri here is a talented and highly respected teacher in the Thyestes Clan. He will be responsible for the initial part of your coaching.” Windsom gave Kordri a stern nod as the two of them stood back up.

“So what exactly will we be doing first?” I asked, almost timidly.

Windsom replied, his voice sounding almost devious. “You will be fighting against Kordri in your soul state, and you will be dying... Over and over again.”

Chapter 109

Snail's Pace

"Trust in your body, Arthur. As long as you are able, your body will be the only thing that will not fail you." As Kordri's words rang softly in my ears, a piercing pain had forced my eyes open as I looked down to see Kordri's hand jutting out of my chest, unbloodied.

"Dammit." As the word left my tongue, the all too familiar sensation of being sucked out of the soul realm, once again, overwhelmed me.

As soon as I awoke back in the cave, my hands shot to my chest, prodding for a hole that wasn't there.

I fell to my back in the shallow pool. "How long this time, Windsom?"

"Two minutes," he replied. "Arthur, the more you are forced out of the soul realm, the more time is wasted in your training. Even if an hour out here equates to about roughly twelve in there, it will not be enough if you are expelled every few minutes."

"Don't blame me, blame your friend that is killing me once every those few minutes," I groaned. It was impossible to get used to the sensation of dying. Even if my physical body wasn't getting injured, the trauma-inducing stress on my mind would be enough to make even veteran fighters go insane.

I'm not exactly sure what the two asuras were thinking, putting a teen through this sort of nightmarish training.

"I am doing only what you are able to handle," Kordri responded, almost as if reading my mind. "The child is resilient, though. It makes me curious why that is. Even young asuras who don't die nearly as often as you do have a hard time coping with the stress."

If I had to guess, it was probably due to the fact that my mental strength was a combination of two lives, but even with that, this training was beginning to take a toll on me.

Windsom nodded in acknowledgment. “Even I grew worried at first by the number of times Arthur had been expelled from the soul realm due to deaths.”

“Well, time to get training again. Are you ready, Kordri?” I gave my body one last stretch before sitting back up.

Letting out an amused chuckle, he gave me a nod. “I will always be ready, Greenhorn.”

“Remember, Arthur, while you are training in the soul realm, your physical body will also be refining your mana core. The longer you are able to last in the soul realm, the faster your cultivation will go. Don’t overexert yourself; it has only been a week into your training. We still have some leeway, but not if you take on more than you can handle,” Windsom cautioned as he activated the Aether Orb.

Kordri and I were, once again, in the same grassy field that expanded endlessly into the horizon. It’s been eight days since I had started this tortu—training. Since one hour outside equates to twelve in here, that means a full twenty-four hours out there translates to twelve days in here. Even counting the time spent out in the physical realm eating, sleeping and resting after dying too many times in the soul realm, I have spent over a few months in this grassland training with the even-tempered and patient monk, Kordri.

“I can tell you are well-versed in physical combat, Arthur, but you have become overly reliant on the usage of mana arts, or what you lesser races call magic. By my guess, you are much more accustomed to shorter battles and duels. Proper conservation and distribution of mana was never a priority, right?” Kordri speculated.

“More or less. I’m only thirteen, remember?” I countered innocently.

“Sure.” The asura shrugged, shooting me a look that told me he didn’t buy it. “You are only human, meaning you are bound by the limitations that follow. You are a long way from reaching white-core stage let alone the integration stage. Because of that, my job is to train your body. After all, the less mana you expend on protecting yourself, the more leeway you have in other areas of use. Now let us begin, I’ve wasted enough time with my rambling.”

“Yes sir,” I answered, getting into a defensive stance. Kordri’s figure vanished and reappeared arms length in front of me.

The first time I had come to the soul realm for training, I was killed in the first blow,

unable to even react. Even when I wasn't killed, I jolted awake at the slightest blow because my soul wasn't used to taking on injuries. The second, third, fourth, all the way up to the twenty-eighth time, I had been thrown out of the soul realm in the first hit. But on the twenty-ninth time, I was able to dodge, just barely... well... enough to persist until the second hit. Residing and training in the soul realm was difficult, to say the least. Only after a few weeks of dying in the soul realm was I able to last long enough to actually call it training.

Kordri followed up his left jab to my neck with a right elbow to my sternum. It was only when we fought that I was reminded of how terrifying Kordri was. His meek temperament disappeared, replaced by a cold, ruthless warrior capable of killing me over a hundred times in the span of a few seconds.

The asura's limbs seemingly vanished due to the high speed in which they were moving. The only reason I was able to dodge was because Kordri's attack pattern was always the same. Of course this was done on purpose; the asura had explicitly told me the choreography of his strikes, never once deviating from that since the beginning of our training. It was pathetic that I was barely able to dodge an attack that I already knew was coming, but that was the difference between us.

Beads of sweat flew off my face and body as I was scantily able to keep up with Kordri's onslaught. Seconds melded together increasingly slower to form minutes as my sense of time dulled. Desperation was evident as I progressively made more mistakes the longer we fought. I had yet to land a single blow on him since the beginning of the training. In the months I spent fighting Kordri, all my strikes had met with thin air.

"Good! you are keeping up longer than usual. Do not get sloppy, Arthur. Remain patient and bide for time if you do not see an opening," the asura shouted as he simultaneously continued striking and easily dodging all of my feeble attempts to land a hit.

I made a blunder at that moment. Kordri's sequence of attacks were strategically placed so that if I didn't dodge it by just a hair's breadth, I wouldn't be able to avoid the next attack.

While I did dodge his spinning elbow, my movement had been too large. I was instantly met with a low sweep that I couldn't avoid due to leaning too far back to dodge his previous blow.

I chose to give up my left foot in response, knowing I wouldn't be able to completely

dodge the sweep. As expected, the crunching blow shattered my left ankle but I continued dodging.

Even in here, where I knew it wasn't real, I didn't want to die.

"Sloppy, but nice follow up. Do not grow desperate and stay levelheaded," he repeated, executing his next blow.

Even with my broken ankle, I was able to somehow dodge more of Kordri's restrained attacks until he did something he hadn't done before.

I was expecting a forward knee to my stomach like he had always done after a right strike, but instead, he shifted his body to perform a roundhouse kick.

I wasn't able to dodge his left leg but I was able to keep myself from dying instantly. Instead of his kick snapping my neck, it had connected squarely with my jaw.

The world tumbled around me as I felt myself skipping like a flat rock on a lake's surface before tumbling to a painful stop on a bed of particularly tall grass.

I wasn't able to talk due to the bottom half of my face being completely mutilated and it took most of my mental capacity to suppress the excruciating pain, but that didn't stop me from good-naturedly extending a middle finger at my mentor.

Responding with a smirk, he helped me up. "You managed to not get yourself killed," he said, seemingly impressed. "Rest until your soul state is healed."

Even as he said this, I could already feel my body, or my soul state, recovering. The broken fragments of my bones fused together as torn muscle fibers, tendons, and ligaments reattached themselves. While people who haven't experienced such a sensation might think that the act of healing so fast would be comforting or soothing, it was actually just as painful, if not more, than the injury caused.

I kept telling myself that experiencing agony like this will be useful later on, hoping it would get me through this torture every time we trained, but I was on the verge of breaking.

It had barely been over a week, yet, because of the time distortion in this world, to me, months have passed. My progress as a mage had always been unrivaled, so training here like this, where my biggest achievement in these past few months had been

staying alive for longer than five minutes against someone purposely restraining himself, I couldn't help but become frustrated and impatient.

"We should take a break from combat training for a while." Kordri's sudden statement took me by surprise. Seeing as he specialized in hand-to-hand combat, I wasn't sure what else he would be teaching me.

"What do you mean? Am I not learning fast enough?"

"No, it's not that. Actually, your ability to grasp and comprehend is frightening, coupled with your stubbornness, it is no wonder that your potential as a mage is beyond anyone else's. However, because of that stubbornness of yours, I'm afraid you are going to unwittingly break down if we keep going at the current pace," my trainer answered as he sat down.

"Break? I thought the realm inside the Aether Orb wouldn't allow me to die? And besides, with the regeneration speed of my soul state, as long as you don't kill me instantly, I should be okay, right?"

The four-eyed asura lifted his gaze and regarded me sternly. "I'm not talking about damaging your body, Arthur. I'm talking about injuring you here," he said, tapping his head.

"So hurting me psychologically?" Perhaps it was the same stubbornness that Kordri had just talked about or a layer of pride that had made me ignorant of this possibility, but I couldn't bring myself to agree with him.

"Arthur. You are constantly experiencing death while training here with me on a daily basis. More so than that, death has no longer become the endpoint but the precursor for a level of pain that even asuras can find daunting." Kordri got up from the ground as he explained. "Even if it won't damage your body, that kind of trauma will start to get in the way of producing the sort of fighter I am trying to train you to become. When we're talking about this level of pain, too much of it and your body will instinctively try to save itself, regardless of whether you want it to or not. Just enough pain, and it will be your most reliable sword and shield."

I thought about my trainer's words for a moment and understood where he was coming from. However, I thought of myself as an exception, having lived through two lives. Call it arrogant, but I felt like I could take it. "Honestly, Kordri, I'm fine, we don't

n—”

I didn't even have time to consciously process what had happened. One moment, we were talking, the next moment, an overwhelming sense of dread crashed down on me like a tsunami. The next thing I knew, I was several meters away from the asura with Dawn's Ballad, my sword, held tightly in my grasp. My eyes focused back on Kordri, only to see the asura with a flower in his hand.

He didn't say anything... he didn't need to.

Just as I let my guard down, Kordri's figure flickered and vanished, and without even a trace of presence or intent, a searing pain made me look down.

My mentor's hand had, once again, pierced straight through my chest. As I tried to pull myself away from him, I fell down.

The asura withdrew his hand and knelt down to be level with me. Giving me a gentle smile, he continued, “Even the gods may not know what sort of life you had truly led, but it is because of your past experiences that this could happen. You trust too deeply in your instinct, Arthur, and while it is a useful tool, it should not be relied on wholeheartedly. Small steps, Arthur. You have much to be taught, but much to unlearn as well.”

As he ruffled my hair, I thought again of the time I was in the institution during my past life as an orphan; the times I had to teach myself from little useful information and tools I could gather. I realized that, for the first time in both lives, I have finally gained an actual mentor. A mentor wise and powerful enough that I can, even with my unique past and monstrous potential, be a student hungry to learn.

“Do you understand, Arthur?” Kordri asked as he got up and extended his hand.

“You bet.” I accepted his hand and pulled myself back to my feet. My body still trembled, but whether it was from the lethal wound in my chest, the excitement of my future prospects or the anticipation from being under skilled mentors; I had a feeling it was a mixture of all three...

Chapter 110

The Lost Art

He was a monster... a true predator.

That was the only thing that came to mind when he released the shackles he put on himself for my safety; when he released that petrifying pressure.

The paralyzing fear slowly spread through my body like a snake's deadly venom. I clenched my sweaty hands, tightening the hold on my sword. The soft blades of grass rippled, swaying leisurely because of my trembling feet. The muscles in my legs continuously twitched, fighting the impulse to whirl around and sprint away. Salty blood filled my mouth as I bit down on my bottom lip. Holding my blade up, I approached the thickening aura emitting from my teacher.

A burning fire in the form of sweat stung my azure eyes, but I dared not to blink. Slowly, painfully, my brain sent signals, picking up my feet, and moving them in a cautious, but steady gait as I walked into the manifestation of fear itself.

"I'm coming, Arthur. Prepare yourself!" the voice rang clearly within the cloud of menacing air.

I forced my tightened jaw to relax and let out a barbaric roar despite already lacking the air to breathe, dispelling some of the chilling fear gripping my insides. "Damn it all!"

The teal blade in my hands dulled as I drew near Kordri, as if even my sword was afraid. But I kept walking, each step feeling as if I was trying to wade across a pool of undried cement.

Finally within range of my blade, I cleaved down, hoping to end this in one strike. Of course, it didn't. Kordri parried Dawn's Ballad like it was a foam stick, creating an arc with his blade as well. Just as my sword was about to hit the ground, I used the momentum to spin myself, whirling my blade back around at Kordri's knees.

Another failed attempt.

Kordri's short sword easily blocked mine, stopping it just short of his leg. Knocking Dawn's Ballad away, my teacher threw a swift kick at my face. I could hear the sharp whistle of air as I dodged in time to bring my sword back up to an upward swipe.

Kordri turned his face to the side so my blade whizzed harmlessly by his ear.

"Your movements are getting better, even with my aura's suppression," my instructor commended. I knew he was just complimenting me, but seeing him have the leisure to talk while dodging came off as annoyingly smug.

It was becoming harder to breathe as I realized I was almost at my limit. One more desperate lunge toward Kordri was all I could manage before Dawn's Ballad fell to the ground, my hands unable to hold onto it any longer. I fell to my knees, my legs giving out soon after, and I was left choking for air inside the confines of this hellish aura.

"Not bad." As Kordri's voice reached my ears the pressure disappeared. Without the suffocating aura affecting me, my body desperately sucked in air.

Over a month had passed in the outside world which meant about a year has passed in here. A year of continuous, torturous training with Kordri's short lectures being the only breaks I had.

Over the course of the month that had actually passed, I have had no contact with Sylvie. The number of times I have been dying and forced out of the soul realm have drastically reduced. The liquid that surrounded my body and Kordri's put us into a mock comatose state, even supplying us with the nutrients needed to stay healthy.

The last time we had left the soul realm was about four months in here, which translated to a little short of two weeks outside.

Kordri had kept me busy, but even then, I couldn't help but long for my family and friends. There were so many matters that I felt like I had put off, continuously filling me with regret upon recollection. Elijah had been taken away to who-knows-where and I wasn't even sure if he was still alive. I also don't know whether Tessia had awoken, moreover, had left my family on such bad terms...

I knew that training right now was the best thing to do, but it ate away at me whenever I thought about it. It didn't help that, during the year I was in here for, the only thing I had to show for it was being able to endure Kordri's killing intent, or "King's Force" as he called it, long enough to have a short exchange before plopping to the ground like

a dead fish.

“H-How... How long... did I last?” I breathed out, finally able to form words as I rolled onto my back.

“You’re improving,” he replied, dodging my question.

I sat up, turning around to face him as I continued to catch my breath. “Not long enough, right?”

“Don’t dwell on the seconds. We are not seeking a specific duration, understand?” He said sternly, more a statement than a question.

“Now, again, but this time, no weapons.”

“Again?” I let out a sigh, picking up my trusted blade and sheathing it.

Kordri tossed his own sword onto the grass before explaining, “I know you prefer swordfighting, and I have to say that your blade, Dawn’s Ballad, is a fine partner to have, but as a mage, hand-to-hand combat continues to be the most versatile and adaptive form of fighting. If you have the patience to learn, that is.”

“Once I have drawn out the maximum potential of your human body, my role as your teacher will be complete. For the sake of the coming war, I will mold your bones, develop your muscles, and train your mind to its limits so that you will be the knight that protects your continent and your loved ones,” Kordri continued, putting some distance between us. “It is obvious that you have had training in melee combat, much more than a normal child. However, like I have said before, your fighting style is more suited for dueling against a single opponent.”

I nodded in agreement. In my previous life, a majority of my fights were in the form of duels since that was the custom there. Wars were rarely held, and even if they were, Kings were not to directly partake in them. After all, our lives were too valuable to risk.

“Since asuras are not allowed to partake in this war, their descendents, the mixed-bloods, will be their strongest forces. Your primary duty in this upcoming war will be to take care of those mutts that the Vritra Clan will send as generals or as special teams. You are incredibly strong, Arthur, but so are they, and do not think that they’ll line up and take turns fighting you. Expect to be put in a situation where you will be surrounded by enemies with asura blood coursing through them,” Kordri affirmed as

he calmly circled around me with his hands behind his back. "Of course, unlike now, you will not have the restriction of mana usage placed on you so you would be free to wreak havoc. However, you will also have to take into account that there might be ally soldiers or even civilians nearby. What will you do then? When it comes down to it, physical combat, laced with proper and precise mana usage, will be the most efficient and dependable way of disposing enemies. Especially if they are on a much higher caliber than the mages you are familiar with."

"I understand." I got into an offensive stance with my leading hand relaxed and my right hand curled into a fist by my jawline.

"The first lesson I had taught you was how to stay alive. More specifically, you were to get a grasp of fighting at higher speeds while trying to dodge a set routine of attacks. While I won't tell you how much I have restricted myself when fighting you, I would say that your agility has improved to a level that I deem adequate. Your lesson, after that, was fighting under conditions of substantial pressure. Combat under the effects of my King's Force, or killing intent as you call it, has strengthened your tolerance a considerable amount these past few months. There is room for improvement in both areas, but for now, it is time for the third segment..." Kordri's voice trailed off as he came to stop in front of me.

"Your field of vision is too narrow, too focused." Kordri's voice resounded in my ears as if he was right behind me as I watched the figure of Kordri I had been concentrating on wisp away.

Realizing that it had been an afterimage, I whipped my head back but I was too late. A clean blow to my back sent me tumbling forward, causing me to take in a mouthful of grass. It was at nonsensical times like these that I couldn't help but admire how realistic the soul realm was. The chunks of grass and dirt in my mouth tasted exactly like how I had imagined they would.

I stood back up, groaning as I stretched my back. "I thought we weren't allowed to use mana," I said, spitting out the grass in my mouth.

"I didn't use mana. Remember, my physiology is fundamentally different from yours. I will restrain myself but it is inevitable that I will be naturally faster, quicker, and stronger than you. Now come," he instructed, beckoning me with his hand.

I immediately propelled myself towards my instructor, putting professional short

distance sprinters to shame as I got within range to attack. I could definitely feel that the mechanics of my body had improved while training with Kordri. My rear foot rotated as I spun my hips to create as much momentum as possible into my strike. Unleashing my right fist, I could feel all of my muscles, tendons, ligaments and bones working in harmony, like a well-oiled machine. Without even relying on mana, I was able to generate enough power in my punch to surprise Kordri.

As he dodged my blow in the last second, I could see a Kordri's lips curl up slightly as he unexpectedly ducked underneath my right arm. All I had felt was a light tug at the leg and a gentle push on my hips but all of a sudden, my face was half buried in the ground.

Never had I been thrown so swiftly, so helplessly, and so painfully as that moment. As I coughed from having the wind knocked out of me, Kordri held his hand against my neck as if it were the edge of a sword. Squeezing my own ribs in fear that it would crumble apart if I didn't, I heard my mentor's voice.

"I have to say. That was a very nice punch, Arthur. How much strength do you suppose you used releasing a strike of that power? Do you think you can do that for two days, three days straight? Can you do that for hours on end without pause and little sustenance in your body to give you that energy?" Kordri kneeled down to assess the damage on my body. "How much energy do you think I spent tossing you? I have to say, because of how powerful your strike was, the less energy I had to expend."

Gritting my teeth to bear the pain, I sprung back up to my feet and took a stance.

"Energetic today, aren't we? Good," he replied, beckoning me once more.

Heeding his gesture, I approached and took a posture as if I would launch the same punch as I had done just before. Instead, I used the punch as a feint and jumped up, launching my right knee to his jaw.

Again, Kordri's movements were different from before. I had been used to exchanging strikes with the asura, but this time, Kordri used his left hand to gently shift the direction of my launched knee, pushing himself to my right side simultaneously. In a quick, fluid motion, my mentor grabbed the collar of my shirt behind my head and executed a drop throw, propelling me to the ground, head first.

The world turned black for a moment and my ears rang fiercely when I woke up.

Carefully, I stretched and massaged my neck, surprised that it hadn't snapped cleanly in half from the force of his toss.

Maybe it was because of the blow to my head, but I suddenly recalled this type of combat art. aiki... do, yes, it was similar to aikido. It was ancient form of combat that was lost due to a decline in traditional martial arts after contemporary forms of combat became more widely used. After becoming a king in my previous world, I had access to numerous archives pertaining to martial arts and the art of dueling. I had glanced briefly through a book on the art of throws but took little interest in it besides the concept of capitalizing on the momentum of one's opponent. Of course, I made much use of that knowledge, but did little to learn the art of throwing; it seemed too inefficient at the time.

"We had talked about proper conservation and distribution of mana when in prolonged battles, correct? Well, it goes without saying that it should be the same for your body as well. No matter how much mana you have flowing within you, it cannot act as a battery to power up your body. Mana, just like a sword, is a tool to control and utilize. Your body is the centerpiece that brings the tools together to create a true warrior. Now, you are healed, yes? Come," Kordri commanded.

Wordlessly, I got back to my feet and dashed once more towards my mentor.

"Your body holds the capabilities of being all kinds of weapons," Kordri explained, getting into an offensive stance. "For example, your fist can become a hammer or bludgeon, powerful enough to destroy walls," he said, throwing a simple punch.

Dodging his first strike, I lowered my center of gravity and released a punch towards his solar plexus.

In a smooth, liquid motion, Kordri pivoted himself, wrapping his own arm around the arm I had just attacked with and redirecting my fist with the flick of his wrist. "It can also become a whip that locks and deflects the opponent's attack."

"Your hands can be blades, your legs, axes, all depending on the user," Kordri said as he whirled around and placed his palm on my back. "And it can also be a cannon, capable of blasting your foes to pieces. Defend yourself with mana, Arthur. I will allow it," he instructed.

I wrapped my body tightly in a coat of mana, focusing more on the area where Kordri's

palm was placed.

The deafening blast of the sound barrier being broken almost distracted me from the pain that spread throughout my body as I hurled through the air like a bullet. It was impossible to tell how many bones I had broken, how many organs had collapsed as my vision darkened and I felt my body being sucked out of the soul realm.

When I opened my eyes, I was in the familiar cave again, drenched in the mysterious liquid as well as my own sweat and probably my tears. A wave of nausea then hit me as if Kordri had actually just punched a hole through my sternum as I buckled forward and heaved out whatever was in my stomach.

“Ugh,” I moaned, trying to collect myself. Kordri was still in front of me, giving me an expression of what I guessed was sympathy, but shifted his gaze behind me.

“Ah, you’re here,” he said, standing up.

Turning around, my vision passed the sight of Windsom and focused on the figure of someone I didn’t recognize. A boy, standing over five feet tall, looked to be about seven at most, took a step toward us and bowed respectfully in my direction. His head was also shaven like Kordri’s, but he only had two, nut-brown eyes. He was skinny but not sickly so, with a nice, toned body that didn’t match his childish face.

“I’m sorry for my lateness, Master,” the boy said, lifting his head, before tilting it as he regarded me. I could see his eyes giving me the once over and, when he locked eyes with me once more, shot me a look of haughty derision.

It seemed beneath me to get angry at a kid who was younger than my sister, so I just raised a brow and turned back to face Kordri.

“Who’s the kid?” I asked unassumingly.

“Arthur, I’d like you to meet Taci... your new training partner.”

Chapter 111

Good Night

“Training partner?” the kid echoed before I had the chance to respond. “Master, I thought you told me to come here so that I could get a chance to finally receive some individual training...”

“Taci, you will also be training as you spar with Arthur here, now come here so we can begin.” Kordri gestured toward the obviously dissatisfied child.

“Master, what benefit will come from training with this... lesser being?” he grumbled, shooting an annoyed look at me.

I thought of it as odd, hearing a child haughtily complain using diction and syntax that didn’t suit his babyish appearance or undeveloped, tenor voice.

“Arthur”— Kordri stressed—“has been receiving special training from me. Sparring with him will help with your development. You also have the rare honor of training using the Aether Orb, yet, you dare complain?”

“N-no, I would never defy your instructions, Master. This pupil only finds it beneath Master to waste your time training a mere human when the Thyestes Clan has many pupils awaiting your mentorship,” the child named Taci clarified, lowering himself to another bow.

I didn’t want to stoop down to his level and be offended by the child, but I had to admit he had a rather special knack for pissing people off.

Letting out a defeated sigh, Kordri continued, “Taci, you are one of my most talented pupils, but it is your arrogance that will hinder you. Windsom, will you be okay keeping up the Aether Orb with an additional person?” Kordri turned to Windsom who was seated on the other side of the pool holding the orb.

“Three people won’t be a problem,” the asura nodded in response, shaking his head as well at the child in front of him.

Keeping my immature thoughts to myself, I returned to my meditating position inside the pool. The child jumped in as well, ignoring me as he sat down so the three of us formed a triangle. Once again, we were inside the same grassy setting as we had been since the beginning.

“Arthur. While the Pantheon race all differ in their utilization of what you call ‘force-type mana’, Taci here has been training in the special arts of the Thyestes Clan. Like I showed you a few times recently, one of the components of our combat art lies in swift, precise strikes, coupled with throws that take advantage of momentum and center of gravity. By relying on our senses to perceive where the opponent is distributing their weight and momentum, we match our attacks to properly take advantage of their strengths. By doing this, we use little effort to dispel their attacks, and conserve our strength for when we attack,” my mentor explained.

Taci had his arms crossed besides Kordri, not taking his eyes filled with contempt off of me.

“When learning this, even our own disciples are forbidden to use mana until they can properly display the basics of our techniques. I am not saying this to boast, but our clan’s fame came from the deadliness of our combat art. When looking at a master, you will see that our form of fighting is both fierce and fluid, like a deadly cyclone. I have only shown you a glimpse of this, Arthur, but I want you to train by fighting against Taci,” Kordri continued as he turned his attention over to the child. “Taci, you are to use your full strength to fight against Arthur; do not worry about fatal injuries or death here.”

I couldn’t help but roll my eyes at the blatantly delighted smirk on Taci’s face as he was told this. However, his smug expression immediately disappeared by what his master said next. “Arthur, you are not to use any mana. I will not be applying any pressure on you as of now, but expect it to come later on. You are also not allowed to attack him at all, but simply block and deflect. The only form of offensive maneuvers you are allowed to make are throws.”

“M-Master? This doesn’t make any sense?” Taci stuttered, shocked. “Shouldn’t you be placing restrictions on me instead of the human? By doing this, do you mean to say that, without these handicaps, he would be able to defeat me?”

“Taci, I am growing tired of your pitiful whining. Are you doubting me?” Kordri’s eyes grew sharp as he spoke. There was no mercy shown in his expression, immediately

shutting Taci's mouth as he frantically shook his head.

I never had the chance to indulge in this feeling... this satisfying sense of victory over a cocky kid when his parent unexpectedly sides with me.

“Now, begin.”

KORDRI'S POV:

Simply saying that I was surprised would be a lying; no, the more accurate word would be astonished. I had a feeling that it might end up this way, but not this soon. Arthur Leywin... what a truly mysterious individual.

Taci, while only seven years of age, displayed an unusual amount of talent from the beginning. He had covered the basics of our combat art in a quarter of the time it took for the rest of his class. His mana distribution was still rough but improving at a rate that even the clan elders couldn't help but admire. He was to be the next generation's star. Yet even with all of the restrictions placed, Arthur was still holding on—no, it was more than that now—Arthur was slowly beginning to keep up.

In the span of only a few days inside the soul realm, Arthur had begun to match Taci. He, who had not even learned the true combat art of the Thyestes Clan, was absorbing knowledge like a starving beast and making it his own.

Despite the speed and power of Taci's attacks, Arthur was able to persist against him. Through each punch, kick, slash and throw that Arthur faced, his steps, his shifts, his movements... they were all becoming faster and sharper as if his body was instinctively shaving away unnecessary movement. His improvement was at a speed that could be easily discernible even to one not trained in combat. How is this possible? What sort of past did he experience? How many people had he fought in order to develop this aberrant level of perception?

In my years as both a warrior and mentor, I had never come across a feeling like this before. I have trained hundreds in the art of combat, from young to old. I've nurtured pupils that had later become leading figures in the Thyestes Clan, but even then, training this boy, Arthur, had introduced me to a sensation that I've never felt before.

Constantly, as I taught him, I had noticed the feeling of excitement, awe, and pride

welling up; emotions that I did not even feel towards myself. It was similar to that of unearthing an unknown, yet obviously precious, gem. Arthur was still dull and rough, but with each buff, he shone brighter and brighter. There was no telling what the final product would look like, but it was this longing to find out that made it so exhilarating, yet regrettable. Was he going to have the chance to develop to his full potential? Or will he run out of time first?

Had he been born an asura, he would be a prominent member amongst even the highest echelons of power. However, the gods have placed him to be merely a pawn; utilized until no longer needed.

Such a pity.

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

This arrogant brat. If it weren't for these restrictions, I would've painted the grass with your blood and tears.

These past few days had been filled with nothing but frustration and resentment at myself for the fact that I was unable to do anything against him. Taci, obviously annoyed by his master regarding him so lowly, coupled with the innate condescension he had over my race, led to me being tossed around like a rag doll and eating too many strikes for my temper to contain.

While his attacks weren't on the level of Kordri's in terms of fluidity and compact precision, due to his attacks and movements being reinforced with mana, they were at a level faster than I was used to.

I almost lost my life on the first strike, but was able to dodge only from the fact that his body gave away his next attack. With the amount of experience that I had with fighting and dueling from my past life and this one, I was able to somewhat anticipate what the opponent would do next based on his posture and movement. This skill worked less depending on how capable of a fighter the opponent was, but Taci, while well-versed in his clan's form of martial art, was still lacking in fighting experience.

Unlike fighting with Kordri, who had no openings or flaws in any of his micromovements, Taci was basically telephoning his next move. Dodging, however, was a whole different problem. While his attacks had openings, they were still at a

level above anyone that I have faced. If it wasn't for the amount of experience I had over the kid, I would've been thrown out of the soul realm already. The power and sheer speed of the onslaught could make any S-class adventurer curl up in utter subjection.

The force of his strikes caused the air around him to whistle and every time I parried his blows, my arms would throb in pain.

Clicking my tongue, I ignored the pain and persisted. It wasn't enough to just be fast. I needed to be faster than him. In order to do that, I needed to lessen my movement. The only way I could dodge successfully without using mana was to cut down my maneuvers to the bare necessities. If I couldn't do that, I would soon be overwhelmed.

"You should go back to your kind instead of wasting my Master's time," Taci cursed as he unleashed another barrage of strikes. Much like myself, he seemed to want to hit me squarely instead of merely tossing me to the ground.

I didn't have the same luxury to respond so I just gritted my teeth and focused even harder.

Faster.

"My mother and father had told me how weak lesser beings were; it looks like it's true. I don't understand why we asuras were given the awful job of looking after you guys," he growled as he turned, releasing an upwards knee jab.

I felt a sharp pain in my ear as I was barely able to dodge the full brunt of the attack with a simple turn of the neck.

Faster.

I couldn't tell how much time had passed; I was used to sparring for hours with Kordri, but this seemed much longer. As Taci continued his relentless assault, my body soon became a canvas of cuts and bruises.

Not enough, faster.

The asura child was obviously growing frustrated as he began trying to go for throws as well. I could see his hand extend out in a claw, hoping to grip at a weak point. By now, however, I was beginning to grow accustomed to his movements so dodging

became easier. His strikes that once passed by me in a blur, were becoming apparent.

“If it weren’t for the Vritra Clan and their disgusting half-breeds, my master wouldn’t have to be stuck here teaching you, hoping a dog could learn something meant for asuras,” the brat spat venomously as he grew more annoyed.

Even faster.

Sweat began stinging my eyes, impeding my vision. Blades of grass flew around us as our steps and movement lifted chunks of dirt into the air.

Faster, damn it!

My body was beginning to protest as my mind grew dull. It was beginning to make sharper movements due to the fatigue in my body. Each time I dodged, my body jolted in pain.

What was I supposed to do? I wasn’t used to fighting for this long and dodging attacks of this caliber was wearing me down at an even greater pace than usual.

If I lowered my speed, then I would bear the full brunt of Taci’s childish rage, but I wasn’t sure how much longer I could continue to hold out.

My mind whirled trying to think of an answer. Think, Arthur. What had Kordri stressed this whole time? Conservation and proper distribution of mana and energy. Taci’s form of fighting wasn’t as concise as Kordri’s but since he was reinforcing his body with mana, he wasn’t tiring as easily as I was.

Fluidity.

Yeah, fluid. Arthur, you dumbass, Kordri had given you the answer. Be fluid, but stay fierce. Like a cyclone.

Even with a clear idea in my head, it was horrifying trying to implement it when one mistake could easily be the death of you. Even in the soul realm, it was still scary.

Taci was also showing signs of wear as his once smug face became lined with a tensed exasperation. His bombardment never slowed, however, as he continued his storm of strikes and grabs.

Don't just dodge. Do more. Look for an opening in his attacks. Follow his movements and go along with it, not against it.

Another cut appeared on my cheek from Taci's strike as I failed to execute the movement I had thought of in my head properly.

Not fast enough, Arthur.

His kick from the side landed squarely on my rib, spinning me off balance.

I bit down on my lip to keep myself from buckling in pain. I knew that a few ribs were broken, which meant that an organ or two were probably punctured.

Faster.

Don't go against his movement. Conserve energy. Be fluid.

Taking advantage of the fact that he had finally landed a solid hit, Taci immediately followed up with a right straight, his fist reinforced with a purple aura.

"Say good night," Taci's snide voice rang.

My brain screamed for my body to duck, to cover my vitals, to avoid this hit. But if I merely dodged, it would be impossible to avoid his next attack.

I Ignored my instincts, using the momentum from Taci's last kick, whirled my body counterclockwise, as his fist headed towards me. At the same time, I raised my right hand, timing it so that it would meet with his.

If I failed in grasping the right timing or speed of this maneuver by a millisecond, my head would probably get blown off, but I buried those thoughts and focused.

Time seemed to slow as my right hand grasped his right wrist. I immediately lowered my center of gravity and slung his arm over my shoulder as I maintained the spin of my body. I could feel the force of his punch as Taci was hopelessly lifted from his feet.

Using the power of his own blow, I redirected his attack and propelled him to the ground.

What I didn't expect was my throw to produce a crater the size of a house. There in

the middle of the devastation was Taci, sprawled out and gurgling blood, with the whites of his eyes showing.

I collapsed to my knees trying to catch a breath, as I realized that the broken ribs had punctured one of my lungs. While I normally don't condone bullying someone younger than myself, looking down at the sorry state of the brat, I let out a satisfied grin.

"Good night."

Chapter 112

Newfound Goal

He overextended his punch; don't dodge, Arthur, duck under and move in.

Her kick is too high, she's off balance; exploit that.

The left hook was thrown prematurely. Lean your head back an inch.

That strike is slow enough; I need to grab that. Parry it, grab ahold of the palm and twist.

Watch out for the low sweep, but don't jump. There's a follow up attack that would be waiting for you if you do. Move in towards the kick where it won't have much power.

An attack is coming from behind. Don't waste time to look back; use his shadow instead.

Kick incoming towards the face, and another aimed at the ribs. Their attacks are becoming more coordinated.

I need to lower my body to dodge the kick aimed at my head and block the one aimed at my ribs. Use the force of the kick to get pushed away from the current disadvantageous position.

"Time!" Kordri's voice thundered, bringing all of us to a freeze.

"Damnit!"

"So close!"

"We could've had him if you had given us one more minute, Master!"

Of the four of them, only Taci didn't say anything, only clicking his tongue in dissatisfaction before turning away.

“Enough! It is four against one and you guys still dare to complain after being unable to land a single, solid hit on Arthur? I should have you lot retrained from the basics!” The four-eyed asura rebuked. Turning his attention to me, he shot me an acknowledging smile. “How do you feel, Arthur?”

Returning his smile, I replied, shaking off the stinging pain in my wrist from blocking the last attack. “Never better.”

About four months have passed in the outside world, meaning that I had trained in the soul realm, thanks to the Aether Orb, for nearly four years. While my body had only aged a year physiologically, a bit more than three years have gone by training under the tutelage of Kordri.

These three years, I had done nothing besides honing my body, my reflexes, and my acuity for combat. My fourteenth birthday had recently passed and it was glaringly obvious just how much stronger I had become, to the point where my past combat abilities seemed about as coordinated as a toddler first learning to walk.

Kordri had also helped refine my mana to aid in combat but hadn’t taught me anything new. Whether it was because of physiological differences between humans and asuras or just the fact that he didn’t want to or wasn’t allowed to pass on the Thyestes Clan mana arts to a non-clan member, I chose not to ask. I merely trusted Kordri and absorbed whatever he did teach instead.

To this day, I wasn’t sure what exactly the Thyestes Clan mana arts was and what it was able to do, but that didn’t matter. Just the fact that I had progressed to this level of physical combat was something I was thankful for.

As the soul realm that we had been training in grew dark, I opened my eyes to the familiar sight of the cave I had been in, physically, for the past year.

“Thanks again for helping me train, guys.” I stood up and gave a respectful nod to the four, novice Thyestes Clan children.

After about the first year inside the soul realm, sparring with just Taci was proving to have a limit, so Kordri brought over more training partners to the point where I was fighting on par with Taci and three other young children of the Pantheon asura race.

Of course the four of them weren’t constantly inside the soul realm like I had been. Because of that “unfairness”, as they constantly pointed out, I had been able to catch

up to them eventually.

The four of them, including Taci, kept a distance from me outside of training, often showing their displeasure at the thought of helping a lesser race train; it didn't help that I had become stronger than them. Of course, this was considering the fact that they weren't allowed to use their abilities to the fullest. Kordri had made it explicitly clear that we were to use mana only for strengthening our bodies; anything outside of that would be considered foul play.

"Master Kordri. Thank you for training me up until now," I turned and bowed respectfully after we both got out of the pool of blue liquid back inside the cave.

"Mmm, it was a treat for me as well," the shaved-headed asura replied.

Giving my body a thorough stretch, I turned to face Windsom. "When is the next portion of our training?" I asked as I mentally searched for signs of Sylvie. This past year, I wasn't able to sense, let alone communicate, with my bond. It had become a custom to search for her every time I was thrown out of the soul realm, but each attempt proved fruitless.

"Huh? Ah, we will start the next portion of training soon." Windsom had the same discerning gaze as Kordri, which confused me.

I raised a brow, shifting my gaze back and forth between the two asuras. "Is everything okay?"

"Nothing's wrong..." Kordri replied as he tilted his head, studying me like a piece of abstract art.

"It's just that you have not changed," Windsom finished.

My heart began thumping louder at his words. What hasn't changed? My initial thought turned to my mana core, but that wasn't it. My mana core had advanced recently from out of the early light yellow and into the latter levels of the light-yellow; meaning, I had progressed past more than a full stage, starting from the solid yellow stage that I had previously been at before starting my training here. Windsom had also come into the soul realm to watch the progress of my training every now and then so he should be well aware of the level I'm currently at.

"Arthur, while training under the Aether Orb can be tremendously beneficial, it is

strictly forbidden to be used on children, or even young adults. You can guess why, right? The time difference between the two realms can cause a psychological displacement on a person not yet fully developed mentally,” Windsom explained.

“I was actually firmly against the use of the aether orb for that reason,” Kordri confessed. “Even Lord Indrath was somewhat reluctant to have you train using the Aether Orb, in fear of the consequences. However, because of the deficit of time before the war, there was no choice.”

It took me by surprise when I heard that Lord Indrath would care for my well-being. That wasn’t the impression I had received when I had met him.

“Which is why I’m somewhat astonished at the fact that there is no change in you, Arthur. Your speech, your demeanor, your mentality; they are no different from what they have been before the training began,” Windsom began. “Essentially, four years have passed since you have entered, but neither during the times you have been brought back out nor now, have you displayed any changes a normal child should have had.”

I mulled over this for a moment. It made sense now why Kordri hadn’t let Taci and the other Thyestes Clan children stay in the soul realm. The only reason why I wasn’t affected by this phenomena was because I already had the mentality of an adult since my birth into this world.

“Windsom, you said yourself that I felt different from other children. I’d been pretty ahead of my age, mentally, for pretty much my whole life; to the point where I grew accustomed to purposely conforming to the people of my age to socially adapt,” I answered at last.

“Well, it matters little to us. In fact, it is for the better that this regimen of training did not produce any unwanted ramifications.” Windsom looked mindful at first, but relaxed as he let out a sigh. “Kordri, thank you for spending much of your time and energy into training Arthur. Anyone else, even amongst asuras, would be subpar compared to your expertise in close quarters combat,” the asura added, turning to Kordri.

“No thanks are needed. Arthur needs to be well trained if he is to have a chance against those mutts.” Kordri placed a firm hand on my shoulder and squeezed. “Remember that the mages in Alacrya have been taught and guided by asuras. Mana arts in that

continent is generations more advanced than in Dicathen. So do not get overconfident from the fact that you are receiving this sort of training. It frustrates me deeply that our hands are tied like this, but if we don't want a war that can destroy the very land we live in, it is up to you and your peers to fight." Kordri's usually indifferent face wrinkled into a grave expression.

After saying our goodbyes, Kordri and his four pupils left first, leaving only Windsom and I inside the unnaturally quiet training cave.

As I sat down on the cold floor of the cave, idly stretching my body while peeking every now and then at Windsom, I couldn't help but try to guess what the asura was thinking as he regarded me so closely.

Trying to break the palpably thick silence, I asked Windsom something that had been desperately on my mind. "So, have you heard any news of Sylvie? Is she doing okay?"

"Lady Sylvie will be fine. No one would dare mistreat the direct kin of Lord Indrath besides Lord Indrath himself," he answered casually, despite the fact that the last bit of his statement sent a pang of worry down my stomach.

Choosing not to dwell on this topic any longer, I simply nodded and continued stretching my body. Because I wasn't physically using my body within the soul realm, it had grown stiff. Muscle mass hadn't dwindled due to the mysterious liquid I had been submerged in, but I had noticed that my hair had grown much longer than I was used to.

I still didn't know the full capabilities of the Aether Orb but the chance to train under these conditions would most likely never come again, so I had to make the most of it.

"Here. I just received this from a messenger of Lord Indrath. It seems like Aldir wrote of the events happening in your continent currently. I thought you might be interested." Windsom spoke evenly as he handed me a few pieces of parchment filled to the edges with immaculate writing.

It was the first time receiving any sort of information from Dicathen. Four months had passed since I started my training, and the more time flew by, the more concerned I became of the well-being of everyone.

Had the war started yet?

What were they doing to prepare themselves for the upcoming battles?

What measures were they taking to protect themselves?

Questions like these and many more filled my head, often distracting me during training until I was smacked back to attention by the four pupils or Kordri himself.

What Kordri said before leaving had sent shivers down my spine in sudden realization. The continent of Alacrya was sure to be more advanced in mana manipulation than Dicathen was. Even with the help of asuras now teaching a handful of capable mages on how to better utilize their mana, it wouldn't be enough if the enemy's armies were truly as strong as I was imagining them to be.

In that sense, I often thought of my training with Kordri to be an inefficient use of time. Of course what I had learned would make me a great combatant in any battlefield, but considering my capabilities, I wondered sometimes if it would be better for me to hone my long-range mana utilization. Of course, conjuring wasn't my specialty, but with my quad-elemental disposition and the amount of raw mana I possessed, compared to other mages, I felt like it would be better for me to learn long range mana arts that were capable of leveling fields instead of learning to destroy enemies around me one at a time. But thinking back to my past as a commanding leader, it wasn't the number of soldiers that posed the biggest threats. No, the ones that presented the most trouble were either leading them or the few elite fighters capable of penetrating through our forces. I couldn't worry about every single insignificant fish; I would just have to trust in our army to handle them.

Putting aside my concerns, I eagerly plucked the paper from his hands and inhaled the words written on the wrinkled paper.

“ ... ”

It seemed that it was made known to the higher ups that Goodsky was formerly a spy sent directly by the Vritra Clan on behalf of Alacrya. A large portion of the written report was actually on Goodsky's intel on the political structure of Alacrya, which surprised me since she was the one who told me of the powerful binding that kept her from even having the intentions of revealing information.

I put aside my suspicions for now and focused back on the report.

Because of the tangible presence of asuras in Alacrya, much of the hierarchy had

become centered around the purity in one's blood. Basically, the closer someone was to that of the asura lineage, the higher status one would hold in that continent. It seemed rather simple and shallow at first, but was Dicathen or any other world different? Of course, the purity in lineage wasn't as apparent in our continent, but it was rather easy to see the distinction between those of 'noble' blood and ordinary people.

I was willing to bet that the higher the purity of their asura blood, the stronger their ability as a mage would be. As a few generations pass, it was easy to predict that there would be a clear division in class based on this fact alone.

It went on to say that she herself possessed very limited knowledge besides the general hierarchy of the elite figures that Agrona himself took care into raising and assembling. One part caught my eye. "So the information that Direc... Cynthia Goodsky provided us, these so-called "Four Scythes", am I to assume that these will be my targets?" I asked without taking my eye off of the report.

Aldir noted further down that, of the potential obstacles, these so-called Scythes and their respective retainers under their commands were of the highest priority.

"Ultimately, yes. But read on. What the Alacryan spy, Cynthia Goodsky, mentioned next is troubling, to say the least.

I did as I was told, and surely enough, the next the paragraph of the report made me curse underneath my breath.

"...based on the purity in color, density and concentration of lingering mana within the horn fragment retrieved from the site where former Lance, Alea Triscan, was killed, Goodsky has asserted that it belonged to a prime-blood of the retainer level of one of the Four Scythes," I read aloud. I assumed that the prime-blood was someone with mixed asura, more specifically Basilisk, blood.

My mind shifted towards the night I saw the remains of Alea. I still remembered the last words we had exchanged after she gave me the very fragment Goodsky had mentioned. This meant that there was a retainer for each of the Four Scythes. Four retainers that were capable of easily dispatching a Lance and four more who were at a level even above them.

Reading on, there was little else that was of significant importance. There were

mentions of armored ships being built from a coalition between the humans and dwarves, as well as towering fortresses being built around harbored cities. Aldir also wrote the recounts he had received of sightings of someone who was perhaps from Alacrya but other than the fact that there was a clear tension throughout the continent, little else had happened.

I could only begin to imagine the scale of this upcoming war. This wasn't a war between the struggles of two rival countries, this would be two enormous continents sending millions of soldiers to fight for their land.

After letting out a deep breath, I gathered the pieces of parchment and stacked them neatly before handing them back to Windsom.

There was a mixture of emotions brewing inside me. News of Dicathen had definitely put my mind at ease. The newly acquired knowledge pertaining to the power of our enemies, on the other hand, sent a cold chill down my spine. However, despite this, I was excited and determined. I finally had a goal, a solid number of enemies to work with. It would be hard to get all of them, but I wasn't fighting random drones or ambiguous opponents that I knew nothing about; I now had an objective and I had my targets.

"Windsom, let's start the next portion of training," I asserted, standing up and straightening my back.

Chapter 113

To Hunt A Prey

Peering down from the edge of the cliff we were currently standing on, I couldn't help but grow anxious. The forest looked like one giant bush that spilled over the visible horizon, with the cluttered trees blocking any view of what laid below. Large birds and other fearsome winged species hovered over the dense collection of green, diving in and retrieving their meal every so often. What scared me more than them, however, were the occasional roars that echoed in the distance. I could only imagine how large they must be if they were able to shake or even bring down trees that blocked their paths as they traversed through the thick wilderness...

"This is where you will be training," Windsom announced, his gaze still fixed on the forest.

"Of course it is," I sighed, making sure that the sack slung over my shoulder was fastened tight.

"Shall we?" After replying with a quick nod, the two of us jumped off the cliff, spreading mana through our body while trying to keep balance against the harsh winds that blew around us.

Right as we were about to plunge into the scores of trees, I willed an updraft beneath my feet to decrease the speed of my fall.

As Windsom and I landed deftly into the massive realm of woodland, the atmosphere changed drastically. The ground beneath my feet was soggy, like walking on foam, and as I placed my weight down, the damp earth relented, hugging my boots and gently releasing them with each step I took.

My nose was bombarded with scents from the abundant foliage, mixed in with the underlying damp smell of moss, dirt and decay from fallen lumber.

"You have given me everything except for the items in your bag, correct?" The asura confirmed, holding his palm out in case I missed something.

“Everything I own is in that dimension ring, which isn’t much. Anything else you wish to take from me? My clothes? A kidney or lung perhaps?” I quipped, looking around at my surroundings.

“Amusing,” the asura replied flatly, taking out a book from his cloak. “Now, since you were so adamant on the fact that you have complete mastery over your internal mana control—”

“I simply said it wasn’t necessary to waste time training that explicitly,” I countered.

“Anyway, I will consider your level sufficient upon retrieving me these three things.” He pointed at the open book.

“Pelt of a raptor squirrel, the beast core of a silver panther, and the claws of a titan bear,” I read the list aloud, absorbing the black and white drawings of each of the mana beasts.

“...and these items will prove, somehow, that I am ready to learn more about the will Sylvia had left me with?” I handed the book back to him.

“In a way. Of course, on the condition that you not use any external mana arts whatsoever. Ah, and you are to wear this at all times,” Windsom added, handing me a bell roughly the size of my fist.

“I really do have to question your idea of training,” I sighed again as I held up the silver bell, triggering a series of vibrant rings way too loud for a single bell to make.

“Let me know when you’ve collected all of the things on the list by breaking the bell.” He turned around, preparing to leave, but stopped. “Oh, and I recommend getting the items in that order.”

Just like that, he was gone, leaving me alone in this forest with nothing but a bell, some blankets, and a leather pouch filled with fresh water.

I had no idea what exactly Windsom was trying to accomplish by having me hunt for these items, but if that was what it took to speed up the training process, then that was reason enough.

“Let’s see. First on the list is the pelt of a raptor squirrel,” I mumbled quietly to myself. It seemed easy enough aside from the fact that I had to capture one in a fairly good

condition.

I pondered over the three items that Windsom requested. If this was some form of a test to measure my internal mana manipulation, that meant that these mana beasts possessed skills, which require me to have a certain level of mastery over them. The fact that it was some type of squirrel most likely meant that it was near the bottom of the food chain. If that was the case, then in order to protect itself, it probably had some sort of defense mechanism, like most preys, to avoid getting eaten.

According to the picture, the raptor squirrel looked like any other squirrel, except with more prominent hind limbs, three, thin tails, and beady eyes. Observing my surroundings, I had yet to see any sort of wildlife.

Concentrating mana into my eyes, I enhanced and increased the range of my vision. Nothing.

I was constantly on the lookout for any indication of fauna while making my way towards the other end of the forest. Several hours had passed but still, no signs.

“This damn bell!” I yelled louder than I had meant to. As if constantly mocking me, the bell rang at the slightest movement I made, deterring any creatures from coming near me.

As the sky darkened so did my mood; all that I had to show for the passing of time was my frustration at the lack of progress. Deciding to call it a night, I made camp out of the hollow trunk of a fallen tree.

To my irritation, sounds of small animals, hidden in the veil of darkness, came out around my campsite as soon as I laid down.

As I tried to get back up, the tinkle of the bell reverberated loudly through the otherwise silent night, causing the creatures to scurry away swiftly.

‘I’ll start fresh tomorrow,’ I decided with a sigh, burrowing back inside my blanket as a chill breeze flowed through the log I was nestled in, and through my clothes, shriveling me up.

A ray of light somehow made it past the layer of leaves and branches and onto my face, rousing me from my slumber. I stayed hidden inside the log, though, keeping completely still so as to not agitate the bell. However, after a few hours, it was obvious

that the bell wasn't the only reason the raptor squirrels were keeping clear of me.

The mana beasts that were at the bottom of the food chain had probably developed extremely acute senses that made up for its lack of vision to avoid predators, which was why, even when I was nearly asleep and completely frozen, they still kept their distance.

For now, hiding my presence was my best bet at hopefully luring the raptor squirrels out. How to catch them, I would have to figure that out after.

After a brief search, I found a decently situated shrub close to a clearing that was thick enough to hide inside. Making myself as comfortable as possible within the stiff branches and prickly leaves, I waited.

Rescinding all of the mana I had constantly circulating around my body, I stayed motionless and observed. Because of the assimilation with Sylvia's will, my body was a lot sturdier than most humans, but I still felt a bit vulnerable leaving my body unprotected in these unfamiliar grounds.

Minutes soon bled into hours as I waited. It wasn't enough to retract your mana; I realized that it was absolutely necessary to clear your mind and intent when dealing with preys. I could feel my breathing soften, almost disappearing as I exhaled in accordance with the occasional breeze that flowed by.

Finally, the fruits of my labor showed as a tiny snout popped out from one of the other bushes, curiously sniffing around for signs of danger. Soon, a few raptor squirrels scuttled about with their three tails constantly twirling around like antennas, desperately trying to find some food before predators caught wind of their presence.

I knew it was impossible to catch the first item on my list today, so I used this opportunity to test some things out. I started by emitting just a bit of mana; the raptor squirrels responded immediately by raising their hind legs to elevate their tails. They had obviously sensed the minute fluctuation of mana and were a lot more tense, some even scurrying away.

As I kept testing their limits, I learned three things: The first was that leaking even a bit of purified mana didn't necessarily drive them away, but alarmed them to a degree where it would be impossible to try and catch one. Exerting too much purified mana would undoubtedly lead them to immediately flee. The second interesting thing I

learned was that internalizing mana inside my body did not trigger their alarm signal, but too much concentration and focus did cause my intent to bleed out, causing them to scatter. The last thing I learned, and perhaps the most useful, was that external mana flow did not startle or even prompt them to take notice.

I learned this as I sat, hidden, meditating. When I was absorbing the surrounding mana, there were no signs of agitation from the raptor squirrels. It was only when I began actively purifying and condensing the mana that they began to notice something was wrong.

The testing took the whole day since I had to change locations every time I made them flee, but with these three observations, I finally had something to work with.

‘I wonder if Sylvie is doing okay with her training,’ I thought as I wrapped my blanket around me back inside the hollow log I decided to use as a makeshift tent. The same worries that I always carried ran through my mind as soon as I had some time to think. How was my family? How was Tessia? How was Elijah? Was he even alive? If so, would I ever get the chance to save him?

It seemed like I had been lost in my own thoughts through the whole night, but at one point, my eyes snapped open to the soft glow of the morning sun.

After packing my scarce belongings, I filled my pouch with a puddle of morning dew that had formed from nearby leaves and made my way to a clearing.

Today’s goal wouldn’t be observing or even catching a raptor squirrel. I wanted to test a little idea that I had based on the three observations yesterday.

As I stood in the center of a small clearing surrounded by plants, with mushrooms I had picked up along the way that raptor squirrels ate; I put my theory into action.

Because my physiology was that of an augments, the mana channels, responsible for effectively spreading purified mana from my core throughout the rest of my body, were much more prominent than my mana veins, which were used to absorb unpurified, atmospheric mana into the body.

However, for this technique, I had to balance the output of purified mana from my mana core through my mana channels and the input of atmospheric mana through my mana veins.

With a perfect balance, I should be able to utilize mana without anyone, or anything, being able to sense that I was. That is in theory, of course.

My mana veins were naturally much more under-developed compared to my mana channels so I started by matching the output of mana to the amount that I was able to input. The feeling was somewhat similar to when I first learned Mana Rotation from Sylvia, but much harder.

The longer I practiced, the more evident it became that it wasn't as easy as I imagined it to be. A certain finesse was needed to accurately come to a point of equilibrium between the two opposing actions, despite doing it while standing still; attempting this while moving would be a whole other mountain.

My perception of time had gotten lost somewhere in the middle of my practice, but to my surprise, when I opened my eyes for the umpteenth time, there were finally raptor squirrels eating from the pile of food that I had picked up.

However, my delight was brief, because as soon as my concentration slipped, they were immediately aware of the mana fluctuation that I had been trying to camouflage.

"Yes!" I pumped my fist. This was good progress. One of the downsides was that, my mana supply ran out... fast. I would be able to practice this for only a few minutes at a time before I had to stop and resupply my mana core.

Even the fact that I was almost at silver-core stage didn't help because of the excess mana being thrown away at improper utilization of this impromptu technique.

The next morning, I kept to my routine and practiced in the middle of the same clearing. It wasn't until the fourth day that I felt like I had enough control to try moving while keeping up this technique.

By the end of the week, I was able to slowly move around but because of the bell tied to my waist, even when they couldn't sense mana, they fled. But I already thought of this. If all it took was hiding my presence, I wouldn't have needed to find a way to utilize this technique.

I needed to master this technique in order to use mana in bursts, pouncing on the raptor squirrels before they could react to the sound of my bell.

Drawing a line in the soft dirt and positioning myself in front of a designated tree as

my target, I practiced.

I stopped right when my bell rang. My goal was to reach the tree by the time the bell chimed, so for this, I needed to utilize enough mana to instantaneously move at a speed fast enough to not shake the bell, all the while balancing the input and output flow of atmospheric mana and my purified mana in order to camouflage my presence from the raptor squirrel's tail.

"Again." I turned and walked back to the starting point after hearing the bell.

"Again," I repeated to myself.

As I continued, I realized that I was essentially aiming for something similar to the technique Kordri had once used when he was sparring with me. Controlling mana flow and power while manipulating your own presence to either hide or emit it, throwing off your opponent's senses.

Erasing your presence by using the barely traceable atmospheric mana to mask the output of your own mana, and instantly gaining speed to reach your opponent. Was this the skill that Windsom had been trying to test?

Again, I would try, and again I would fail to reach my goal. But with each attempt, the distance between the tree and I shortened before the bell jingled.

It was just one step, but so much concentration and precision went into getting it even partly right.

However, this single, instantaneous step, coupled with the form of combat that I had been taught by Kordri as well as the sword art that I had developed myself, could undoubtedly become an important trump card.

I remembered how disoriented and helpless I had been when Kordri had used this skill, erasing his presence as he attacked, while the next instant, he would emit his presence only to shift positions and throw me off. Although the asura wasn't using his mana in the same way as what I'm attempting to do, his innate power could be easily comparable to that of someone in the silver core stage.

"Almost," I encouraged myself, positioning myself for another attempt.

I wasn't sure how many hours had passed since the dense cluster of trees covered

most of the sky, but I sunk down against the tree.

Days passed by as I continued practicing, until...

“Hehe...”

I laughed meekly in victory as I stared at the depressed, dirt trail that I had made from the days of mastering this skill. While the rest of the ground was littered with leaves and broken twigs, only the thin trail I had been constantly dashing back and forth on was paved clear.

I tried getting up, but my legs trembled in protest, too worn out to carry my weight. Still, I felt good for the first time in a while since coming to this godforsaken forest. “I’ll wipe out those stupid raptor squirrels to extinction,” I declared triumphantly.

WINDSOM’S POV:

‘What is the boy planning?’ I thought to myself, keeping a fair enough distance from him. I had left him unattended for two weeks, thinking it would be plenty of time for him to have caught a raptor squirrel.

From the fact that I wouldn’t have been able to find him in this forest without the help of the bell I had given him, it was obvious that he had mastered erasing his presence. Despite this, Arthur had yet to catch a single squirrel.

The raptor squirrels were swift and highly perceptive. Since their eyes were bad, they relied on their acute nose to sniff for food and their tails to sense any sort of mana fluctuation or even movement in the area. If their tails detected a high concentration of mana or even a minute change in mana levels in the area, it would be difficult for even an asura to catch one.

However, beyond that, the raptor squirrels were rather simple-minded. After erasing his presence, if the boy were to stay absolutely still with some bait in his hands, it would be easy for him to catch one. Yet, the boy had laid out food in front of him, instead.

‘Well, he learned the necessary skill that I wanted him to learn,’ I shrugged, but for some reason, my gaze was still glued to the boy, as if waiting for something astonishing

to happen.

The boy stood unmoving as he continued to wait patiently for a raptor squirrel to draw near.

In the blink of an eye, the boy had suddenly disappeared and reappeared in front of the raptor squirrel with his hand stretched out.

“He...” my voice trailed off in awe.

Right when the boy was about to grab ahold of the raptor squirrel, however, the bell I had given him rang and the raptor squirrel darted away just outside of Arthur’s grasp.

“Gah!” The boy yelled, obviously frustrated as he kicked the pile of food he had gathered to lure in the raptor squirrel.

There was no way he could move at that speed without using mana, but...

I couldn’t sense it.

That means, he wasn’t simply just erasing his presence by withdrawing his mana and hiding his intent. He had been effectively using his own mana while covering it with the pure mana surrounding him

Mirage Walk. It was a rather crude shadow of it, but Arthur had definitely just succeeded in the first step of Mirage Walk. It was a movement technique to put it simply, but it was also much more than that. Mirage Walk was the essence of what made the Thyestes Clan reign over all of the other clans within the Pantheon race.

For a mere human boy to be able to grasp the fundamentals for a mana art that even took me years to grasp... and this was with Kordri secretly teaching me despite his Clan’s strict secrecy regarding their mana arts.

For him to be able to get this far just by watching Kordri...

Chapter 114

Workings Of A Single Step

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

“Finally,” I whispered, too quiet for the silver panther to hear.

There it was, cautiously sniffing around as it approached the raptor squirrels I had killed and placed carefully to lure it out. My ever-so-elusive target.

My eyes locked onto the large, gray cat that I had named Clawed because it had four, long gashes across its back. Clawed and I had gotten close during the time spent trying to hunt for silver panthers. This particular oversized cat was by far the most cunning of the silver panthers that I had come across and the most arrogant; which was why I had decided that Clawed would be my target.

I focused back on the cat just a few meters away from me as Clawed stopped and looked around, ready to escape at a moment's notice.

I patiently waited for him to draw near, making sure to keep any traces of my presence hidden. Coalescing the raw mana around me with the purified mana inside my body, I prepared my attack. As I gathered mana in my legs and right arm, I lowered myself carefully into an ideal position since he couldn't see me anyway, making sure I didn't set off the bell.

The muscles in my calves and thighs twitched in anticipation at the thought of finally being able to catch that elusive cat. Right when Clawed bent down to continue its lunch, I propelled myself forward and struck at a speed that would've shocked my old self.

The distance I near-instantly cleared from my initial position to where I now was - in front of Clawed - measured out to be roughly six meters, but somehow Clawed had already disappeared before my attack could connect.

My augmented fist sunk deep into the soft dirt floor, the silver panther nowhere in sight.

“Damn it! Again?” I cursed, impatiently prying my buried hand from underneath the ground.

‘Where did I go wrong? How could it react so fast?’ I thought as I looked back at where I was initially positioned. The location was close enough for me to cover instantaneously. I was well-hidden inside the bushes, and I had even gone through lengths to mask any smell from my body that might set it off. It was all supposed to be perfect. My execution of the technique I had been training in was near perfect.

I kneeled down, inspecting the pawprints of Clawed and my own footprints. I was missing something, but what?

I could see where I landed after using Burst relative to where Clawed had been positioned, but something about the markings on the ground didn’t add up.

Settling down against a nearby tree, I closed my eyes, replaying the scene in my mind to see if I could figure out where I went wrong.

“Windsom wouldn’t have made me acquire a silver panther beast core unless it proved to teach me something different than hunting raptor squirrels,” I said aloud. “In terms of speed, the raptor squirrel was definitely faster than a silver panther. So why couldn’t I kill one?”

Arriving at no satisfying conclusion, I decided to make my way back.

Looking at the remains of the raptor squirrels Clawed had been feasting on, I clicked my tongue in annoyance. Not only was I unable to capture Clawed, but there were also barely any scraps left of the raptor squirrels for me to eat.

After packing what was left of the mangled squirrel, I wiped the dirt and blood off me at a nearby stream. Seeing as I only had one set of clothes, I tried to make sure it stayed clean, but through the weeks of hiking and training in these woods, my wardrobe had become tattered.

“Arthur, you are not easy to look at,” I said derisively to my reflection in the stream. My hair was disheveled and much longer now, my bangs reaching all the way to my chin. The bags underneath my eyes had turned purplish from lack of sleep. All in all, little remained of my former, hygienic self; replacing it was some unintelligent-looking brute.

It was hard for me to believe that more than a month had passed since the last time I had any actual interaction with someone other than the animals I had caught.

Windsom had visited me the night I had finally been able to capture a raptor squirrel. He hadn't said much with his permanently disinterested expression except that the technique, or rather, the preface of it that I had self-taught, was called Mirage Walk. He had disappeared soon after, leaving me by my lonesome to eat the lean meat of a raptor squirrel's hind leg.

The next morning, I had set out in search of the next prey on my list, a silver panther. However, it had become fairly obvious during the weeks that I had spent inside the forest, training to catch more raptor squirrels, that there were no signs of larger mana beasts at all.

Thus, leading me to venture out further into the woods despite the dangers that might've followed. It wasn't until about three weeks of trekking deeper into the forest that I had begun seeing different species of mana beasts; larger ones as well.

I would've cleared more ground in those three weeks had I not been using the journey itself as a form of training.

Burst or Burst Step.

That was what I had decided to name the first sequence of Mirage Walk. Windsom had only mentioned that what I had done to catch the raptor squirrel was only a mere introductory step of the actual essence of Mirage Walk, but he had refused to divulge any more information than that. However, seeing that the technique I used had certain steps or levels to reach full mastery, I had decided to name this first tier Burst Step.

I had traversed through the forest, using the abundance of trees as a natural obstacle course to practice, hoping to gain some insight to improve the skill.

Going through with this training had made me realize how much concentration, coordination, reflexes, control, and agility one needed to utilize the full potential of Mirage Walk properly. I had succeeded in capturing a raptor squirrel with Burst Step only because I had made the necessary preparations to be able to. It had been a flat clearing with no obstructions to get in my way. The distance was short, and within view, it had no time even to react.

However, trying to travel through the lush greenery, congested with trees and uneven

ground, to get a foothold using only Mirage Walk had made me feel as though I was an infant again, except this time with my feet tied together. It was terribly frustrating, tripping over the slightest misstep, even the faintest miscalculation in trajectory resulted in a not-so-elegant tumble and a face full of mud; slowly and painstakingly, I made my way deeper into the woods.

It had been over a week since I first arrived at this particular domain. The mana in this area was much denser than where I had been before, which was probably one of the reasons why it was so appealing to higher level mana beasts.

And here I was, still with nothing to show for besides the number of tears in my shirt and holes in the soles of my boots.

As I finished washing myself, I inspected the leftover meat I had brought back. "This isn't enough," I sighed looking up at the sky.

Dusk had spread a thin veil of darkness over the forest, but it was still light enough to hunt. I laid out some mushrooms I had picked along the way and waited, crouching underneath a large root eight meters away. With my level of mastery, I could clear almost ten meters in an instant using Burst Step without triggering the bell.

As I waited, keeping my presence hidden, I observed carefully for any signs of movement. There was faint sound of rustling, but it came from above me, somewhere up in the trees. Glancing up, the last glint of sunlight reflected off the eyes of the predator. It was some sort of large, black bird.

As the forest completely darkened, the bird and I waited, hoping for any signs of our next meal.

Finally, I locked onto the figure of a lone raptor squirrel. Before the squirrel drew close enough to be in range for me to kill, the black bird had already decided to take action.

I barely glimpsed the faint shadow of the bird diving down; no noise made whatsoever. It wasn't unnaturally fast like the raptor squirrel or silver panther, but at night, it was near impossible to see this predatory bird.

As the black blur drew closer to the unsuspecting prey, something unexpected happened. The bird, nearly invisible to the naked eye, spread its wings and let out a loud crow.

The squirrel immediately jumped, but the crow seemed to have been expecting that because, instead of swooping down where the squirrel had been, it stretched out its talons to where it leaped away.

That whole scene looked as if the squirrel simply leaped into the claws of the bird, wanting to be its next meal.

I had lost my meal to the bird, but I gained something much more valuable instead.

“Hehe.” Hoping to be able to put my plan into action, I waited again. As I predicted, the bird had finished its meal and was waiting patiently in a different tree. The bird’s wingspan alone was about larger than mine so I knew that one squirrel wouldn’t be enough.

About half an hour passed when another raptor squirrel finally emerged. As its three antenna-like tails surveyed for danger, it cautiously approached the small pile of mushrooms.

On cue, I saw the swift blur of black out of the corner of my eyes.

Not yet.

It happened again. Right when the black bird swooped down and stretched out its talons, the raptor squirrel appeared as if it jumped right into the bird’s grasp.

Now!

Using Burst Step, I cleared the eight meters between us, and before the black bird had even the chance to react, I reached for its neck.

The bird let out a surprised crow as it flapped desperately to escape my hand. To my surprise, however, the greedy bird never let go of its meal even as I snapped its neck.

“Yes!” I couldn’t seem to wipe the smile off my face as I made my way back to my camp with my two trophies. I was happy that I would have something tastier to eat than the tough and lean squirrel meat, but I was even more satisfied with the fact that I had figured out how Clawed and the rest of his brethren had been escaping from me every single time.

It didn’t take long for me to get back to my camp, which was just a hollow log I had

covered with branches and leaves to protect me from the rain.

Eagerly plucking the feathers off of the bird so that its fat-coated skin would still be intact, I grilled it over the fire I had made alongside with the skinned raptor squirrel. Chewing on the tender meat of the bird's thigh, I started thinking.

I had uncovered two things as I saw the black bird capturing the raptor squirrel: First, the bird was stealthy and swift, but its speed couldn't compare to that of a raptor squirrel. It was able to because it knew that when it made itself known, the squirrel would try to flee in a particular direction. The second thing I had deduced was the significance of my involvement in this. As a third party spectator, I was able to see the bird beforehand, and I immediately knew what its motives were even before it had attacked, something the squirrel had no way of knowing.

"But this still doesn't explain how I can catch Clawed," I muttered to myself, ripping out another bite of grilled fowl.

Based on all of my failed attempts, I knew by now that Clawed and the rest of his kind had some hyperacute intuition that allowed him to react near instantly at the sight of my movement. I also knew that, unlike the bird and squirrel that I was feasting on, Clawed was smart. There had been several occasions where he would get close enough to me that I knew he was mocking me, but as soon as I got in a stance, he fled even before I could execute Burst Step. He was smart to a level where he knew he could evade me, but not fight me face-to-face.

Finishing the last of my meal, I walked over to the side of my camp where I had cleared some space for me to train.

I stood at the edge of the open space and imagined Clawed to be lurking at the other end. "How am I supposed to catch a cat that reacts as soon as I try to approach it?"

Approach... approach? That was it! It was just like the black bird! The bird had tricked the squirrel by intentionally exposing itself, using it as a feint to get the squirrel into the air where it couldn't change direction.

Even when Kordri, an asura, had used Burst Step, it was still essentially still a single step. Corresponding muscles were still used to propel himself towards me. Even though the essence of Mirage Walk was to conceal fluctuation of mana to throw off the opponent completely, I still had to move the muscles that were responsible for making

that one, incredibly fast, step.

But what if I could get rid of that?

What if I could almost entirely void the motion needed for me to make that step? Appearing as if I had truly teleported from even a standstill position.

If I could do that, I could, in theory, feint Clawed.

But how do I come up with a way to make Burst Step into something that would bypass the need to control the muscles mechanically?

I'd imagine if I were any other mage or mana manipulator in this world, I would've thought of it as impossible, but I had one crucial advantage: Knowledge from my past life.

Due to my mediocre ki center, I had studied in-depth about the human body, namely the working mechanics of what went into essentially putting the human body into movement. It was through this knowledge that I had been able to fully utilize the little ki I had inside me to become a king.

Shutting my eyes, I used the entirety of my concentration as I spread mana throughout every crevice, no matter how micro, of the inside of my body.

When I opened my eyes, the sun was already high up in the sky. Sweat and grime covered my body as I slowly stretched my stiff body that had been standing still for hours. But I was happy. Ecstatic.

Not only had I reached a breakthrough to get me at the very peak of the light yellow stage, but I had also figured it out.

"I got it," I grinned.

Chapter 115

Predator's Domain

The quadriceps located at the front of the thighs; they were responsible for pushing the thigh and leg forward. The hamstrings were the quadriceps' opposing muscles, responsible for bending the leg and moving it backward. The glutes were crucial to complete the backward movement of the step. The abdominal muscles would contract during each forward step. The calf muscles, albeit smaller, were actually among the most heavily used muscles that propelled the body forward as the foot pushed off the ground. These were just the primary muscles.

The secondary muscles that also needed to be taken into account were the stabilizing muscles located around the pelvis. These series of muscles formed a crown around the pelvis, which included the internal and external abductors, I think they were called, the lower abdominal muscles and the spinal muscles located in the back. The tibialis... something, the thin strip of muscle that helped you flex the ankle in order to move the foot towards the knee, was also used to make sure the foot wouldn't flatten, creating a greater chance of scraping against the ground or an object.

The body had an intricate muscular system that worked in pairs, each responsible for half of a complete movement. The biceps flexed when the arm curled towards the shoulder, while the triceps triggered when the arm straightened out. The mechanisms inside the body were even more complex when putting the body into motion, such as walking, running, or jumping.

This knowledge hadn't been all that useful until now because of my rather exceptional physique in mana. However, in the case where I needed to further evolve the first sequence of Mirage Walk, I would need to utilize all of this knowledge and a step above that, eventually putting it into application.

"Damn!" I lifted my arms to catch myself as I toppled forward onto the pile of leaves I had fashioned into a bed.

Noticing that the sun had already set, I went back to my camp and retrieved a few strips of squirrel meat that I had smoked prior so that I didn't have to keep hunting.

“I really wish I could use the aether orb for this,” I muttered, looking down at the charred, tasteless meat in my hand.

I had made significant progress since I first put on hiatus my hunt for Clawed and devoted all of my time and energy into training this past week, splitting the days into practicing Burst Step and refining my mana core. The remaining two or three hours were used for sleep.

However, the more I practiced, the more I hungered to master this movement technique. With the tweak I had made using my previous knowledge of human anatomy, Mirage Walk would become even more refined, theoretically. Not only would it be instant and versatile, but it would also be as deadly as it was elegant.

The basics of Burst Step that I had first succeeded in executing looked almost like a wide leap, granted that it was still incredibly fast. This was because, although mana couldn't be sensed under the effects of Mirage Walk, there was still a stance and a series of motions that needed to be made in order for the human body to be able to take that step.

Kordri, even as an asura, using Burst Step in his human form, also couldn't ignore the mechanisms of his body despite his superior physique.

What I was working my way towards was consciously and deliberately manipulating mana, channeling it into specific muscles at a certain progression with precise timing to artificially trigger a sequence in my body that mimicked the use of muscles without actually having the need to maneuver.

If I could get the timing and output of mana controlled perfectly, I would be capable of something even Kordri couldn't do—execute Mirage Walk in, but not limited to, an orthostatic or standing position.

“Gah, even thinking about it was confusing,” I relented. Finishing my dinner, I headed back to the clearing I had crudely optimized in the last week.

Standing about five meters away from the bed of leaves that was made to soften my fall, I concentrated. Willing mana to manipulate my muscles was a lot like using your thoughts to make a dummy move. Most of the movements that people do were automatically done; I didn't have to think of what muscles I needed to use to breathe. However, since I would be using a mediating factor, mana, in order to generate an

action from my body, it was like learning to move all over again.

“Ugh.” I spat out the mouthful of leaves and wiped my tongue with my sleeve. Getting back up, I returned to my initial position and concentrated again, disregarding the increasing aches in my legs.

I had somewhat succeeded in propelling myself using the bare minimum amount of movement, but coming to a proper stop was another, huge obstacle that I was having trouble overcoming.

Just like how a toddler couldn’t control how far or high he jumped, using mana to manipulate the inner workings of my body had made it hopelessly difficult for me to control.

However, at least the initial step and the very foundation of Mirage Walk where I manipulated atmospheric mana to conceal the fluctuations of mana in my body had become much easier for me. I still needed to balance the capacity of my mana veins to my mana channels for me to better control this, but I didn’t have time for that now.

After I had properly hidden my presence, I imagined the muscular system in my body. Recalling all the muscles responsible for using Burst Step, I tried once again.

Interrelated parts of the body required for movement lit up on the imaginary figure of myself in my head to better conceptualize the specific order that I had willed the mana to trigger. I could feel the corresponding muscles pulse as mana coursed through in the sequence I had commanded. With just the slight shift of my left leg and the aid of mana, the landscape around me blurred as I executed Burst Step from a standing upright position.

Despite the mana I had willed to reinforce my legs from the stress, a sharp pain coursed through my lower body.

“Woah!” I yelped as I tumbled forward onto the pile of leaves once again.

I had failed again in coming to a full stop. Even if mana could help me with the initial burst of speed, it was much harder to stop in the exact position and location that I had wanted to.

Letting out a defeated sigh, I continued practicing.

As the sun sank and a crescent moon shifted into view, I laid there in the bed of leaves staring vacantly at the night sky. Raising my hand, I pinched at where the moon appeared to be with my fingers. The moon looked so small from here... how small did I appear to be to the moon?

I focused on the left arm that I had lifted, staring at the feather Sylvia had given me to cover the orb with and the dragon will she had imparted to me.

This, and Sylvie, were all I had left of the asura that had saved me, taken care of me, and protected me as a child. Would training like this really allow me to hear from her again, eventually?

Reminiscing my time with her had made long for everyone else. Despite how poorly we had parted, I missed my family.

“Enough, Arthur.” I slapped my cheeks and sat up from the pile of leaves. There were only so many hours in a day, and I couldn’t afford to waste more out here in this godforsaken forest.

Taking a deep breath, I began cultivating my mana core. It had been a slow process once I got to the light-yellow stage. I was chipping away at a mountain with only a spoon in my hand, but there was definite progress.

I got lost in the ever-cumbersome process of absorbing, purifying, and refining when the familiar chirps of morning birds snapped me out of my meditation.

I was covered in sweat and grime as my body expelled the impurities in my mana core, making me not only filthy but hungry as well.

Looking at the remains of smoked meat I had left, I would have to hunt today. After gnawing through the remainder of my charred squirrel, I packed my water pouch and departed.

Keeping my mind placid and my presence hidden with Mirage Walk, I slowly trekked deeper into the dense forest. It had been harder for me to find wildlife near camp, so every time I hunted, I needed to go a bit deeper.

By the time I noticed, however, I realized that the forest had gotten much quieter. Birds chirped in the nearby distance, but there were no signs of raptor squirrels or other mana beasts in the vicinity

“Hmm,” I muttered, surveying the area. Releasing the use of Mirage Walk, I concentrated mana into my ears. I wasn’t able to hear anything at first, but after a few minutes I caught on to a faint noise. It sounded like a growl. I couldn’t tell how far away it was, but the sound was familiar; there was a silver panther nearby.

I got a little closer, making sure to hide my presence again. I enhanced my hearing once again, but this time, I was able to make out more noise. I could hear the faint gurgling sound of running water, and a bit past that to the northeast. What I also noticed was that it wasn’t just one silver panther. There were two panthers in the same vicinity.

“That’s odd,” I noted. My understanding of the silver panthers, from what I’d seen so far, was that they were territorial amongst each other and hunted by themselves.

Perhaps they were fighting over territory? That would certainly explain the lack of prey in the vicinity...

Implementing Mirage Walk again, I hastily made my way towards the ensuing battle. I couldn’t help but grin at my luck.

My speculation had been correct; as I stealthily approached the sound of the silver panthers, I spotted their distinct silver coat near a small clearing of trees alongside a cliff. It was impossible to tell how deep down the fall was from here, but just from the fact that there was a good two hundred yards from here to the other end of the chasm, and I couldn’t see the ground meant that if those silver panthers fell off, it wouldn’t be easy for me to retrieve their bodies.

Hiding behind a nearby tree, I observed. It was easy to figure out that they were clearly hostile to one another, but what caught me by surprise was that one of the silver panther was Clawed; the distinct scars on his back made him easily distinguishable. His opponent, on the other hand, was unfamiliar to me. He was clearly larger, but by the fresh wounds on its face and side, it seemed like Clawed had the upper hand.

As the two mana beasts slowly circled each other, they let out a low gnarl, baring their sharp teeth.

The opponent was the first to make a move. The larger cat pounced with its claws held high as it let out a fierce snarl.

Clawed reacted instantly, dodging the swipe and countering with his teeth. I became captivated by their fight. Since silver panthers had innately accelerated reflexes and

intuition, their exchanges were a relentless flurry of continuous dodging and countering, neither of them incurring any deep wounds. However, for every gash that the larger panther had made, Clawed had given him three in return.

As their battle continued, I didn't know why, but my heart began pounding restlessly. I was anxious about something, afraid. I had been so caught up in their duel that I didn't realize how deadly quiet the forest had become, almost mute. There were no sound of birds chirping or mana beasts moving; there wasn't much as a rustling sound coming from the trees as if even the wind was afraid of something.

Clawed seemed to have noticed as well because he began behaving very cautiously. His fur was standing on end, his tail sticking straight up as he constantly sniffed for something. The larger cat, unaware of the disturbance, took advantage of the opening and pounced at Clawed. Dodging his opponent, Clawed instead turned and started running away.

I didn't get it. There was something going on, but I couldn't sense any other presence from here. Why did Clawed run away like that when he was winning?

Putting aside my wariness, I took action against the larger silver panther that remained. He was injured, and his escape routes were limited because of the cliff.

Spotting me, the larger cat began growling, lowering itself into a posture to flee. It knew instinctively that, in its state, it had no chance against me.

The air around us grew heavier as it became harder to breathe, but I maintained my stance.

Now!

The moment I lifted my foot up, the silver panther leaped to the side.

"Got you," I smirked. Ignoring my protesting legs, I executed Burst Step from my standing position, using the fake step as a feint to get him to move. My surroundings blurred, my eyes focused only on the movement of the wounded mana beast. I had succeeded in cutting him off, but the distance I had cleared was insufficient by just over a meter.

As I lost my balance, I desperately grabbed onto the panther's neck with my arms and held on tightly.

“Gah!” My body jerked unnaturally from the abrupt change in direction and I left was hanging onto the silver panther with all of my strength.

“You’re mine!” I hissed between my teeth as I used mana to strengthen my hold on him. My only hope was to choke him.

The panther I was riding on let out a vicious snarl as it whipped its head, trying to throw me off but I endured. Its sharp claws tore at my clothes, ripping fresh wounds on my sides and legs before it buckled feebly from lack of air.

Just when I thought the panther was about to relent, it suddenly jerked. As if possessed, it used the last of its strength to throw itself backward. By the time I realized what it had done, the ground underneath us was gone as we plummeted down the steep gorge.

Hurtling down, I was reminded of a very similar scene from when I was just a toddler, thrown off the edge of the mountain in order to save my mother.

A thousand scenarios ran through my head as I struggled to decide on the best option to take. The silver panther that had dragged me down to hell was out cold from my choke and was helplessly falling beneath me.

Uttering a string of curses, I slowly balanced myself on top of the unconscious mana beast and exerted mana into my legs. The scene around me was a constant blur from the speed that we were dropping.

“Windsom would understand!” I convinced myself aloud as I propelled myself off the panther.

With the push, I had slowed down but not nearly enough, and there was no place to grab onto on the edge of the cliff.

Another scene flashed into my head; it was the time when I had fallen down the hole in the dungeon, Widow’s Crypt.

‘Was falling down deep chasms going to be some sort of reoccurring theme in my life?’

A surge of wind gathered into my palms as I stared straight down at the approaching ground, concentrating on coalescing my mana into the spell.

Now!

[Typhon's Howl]

Releasing the spell gathered my palms, the blast of wind surged toward the ground, a deafening screech echoing throughout the steep ravine.

Gritting through the pain in my arms as they held the brunt of the strain from the recoil, I continued exerting mana into the spell.

I could feel the force of the spell negating my fall as I came to a slow hover. Suspending Typhon's Howl, I dropped down the remaining few meters onto the ground in the center of the blast radius.

A thick cloud of dust had arisen from where my spell had collided with the dirt floor, impeding my vision. Masking my mouth and nose from the debris in the air, I began making my way out of the dust cloud when an earth-shattering roar resounded.

After the thunderous howl had subsided, the ground shook once again at the sound of heavy footsteps approaching me.

The force of each resonating stomp threw me off balance. Immediately, I dashed toward the edge of the gorge, praying to whatever divine being that ruled this realm that the cause of such devastating sounds were from an earthquake.

Chapter 116

What Lied Within

As I made my way toward the edge of the ravine, desperately looking for any place to hide, a deep thud shook the ground. A surge of wind then blew toward me, dispersing the cloud of debris that had been my only source of cover.

It was too late to hide.

Whipping my body to face my new enemy, I waited for the last of the dust to clear. Heavy footsteps approached my direction and the suffocating pressure I felt from the top of the cliff had been magnified tenfold.

Out from the fog of rubble, the shadowed figure stepped out into full view, leaving me all the more confused.

Letting out another devastating roar, it took another step toward me. "For two meals to fall in front of my home just before my deep slumber, how lucky of me."

I didn't know what to expect when coming face to face with the titan bear, but I sure as hell didn't expect it would be half my size and have the ability to talk. Titan bear my ass, there was nothing 'titan' about it. Maybe it was just a cub? In which case, this was a good opportunity.

I stood my ground, not knowing how to proceed. I would've rather avoided a direct confrontation with this mana beast until I knew more about it. The pressure the beast had emitted was no joke, despite its appearance. If this titan bear was only just a cub, I wouldn't want to have anything to do with a full grown one. Or maybe it was an adult titan bear, and it had the ability to alter its size like Sylvie?

The titan bear looked down, regarding the dead panther in front of him before turning his gaze back to me. "This meal isn't going anywhere. I should start with you," the beast, less than a meter tall, growled, licking its lips.

There was no way for me to get out of this without fighting. Lowering my stance, I prepared to fight. I had expected the titan bear to come charging at me, but it stood in

place.

Abruptly, the mana beast thrust its paw in my direction, somehow propelling me backward.

The bell tied to my waist rang mockingly as I tumbled on the hard ground.

“Guh!” I gasped for breath, relieved that it wasn’t blood that I had just choked out.

‘What the hell was that? It felt like I was shot in the stomach by a cannon.’ Getting back on my feet, I concentrated on the titan bear that was about ten meters away.

“Ooh! A tough meal,” the bear snickered. The sight of a bear, no higher than my elbow, standing on two legs and speaking coherently was an odd sight, but I had no room to be amused.

His attack just now was definitely some kind of long range spell, but I couldn’t understand why I had felt no mana.

The bear slowly lifted his paw, as if mocking me. As soon as the titan bear swung down, I activated Mirage Walk and used Burst Step.

My jaw clenched as I gritted through the ache that had intensified throughout the past several days.

A sharp pain suddenly came from my left leg. Looking down, I could see fresh blood flowing from a gash on the back of my calf.

I had expected the attack to be like the last one, but this invisible spell had taken the form of something sharp.

This attack as well; I wasn’t able to sense it.

The smile on the titan bear’s face was gone. It seemed like he wasn’t expecting me to dodge another one of his attacks.

“Stop running!” It growled, swinging his paw once more.

Immediately dropping to the floor, I narrowly avoided the slash attack, the severed tips of my hair sprinkling down on my nose.

It was a risky gamble, but through that last attack, I was able to figure it out. When he slashed with his paw, the attack that was released was also a sharp slash. When he punched with his paw, like he had for the first move, a blunt force was shot out.

The titan punched at me from the distance, sending another invisible cannon my way. Even when I concentrated mana into my eyes, I wasn't able to see the attack, leaving me no choice but to blindly throw myself out of the way.

The mana beast's spell hit my side and I felt ribs cracking. Not giving me time to prepare again, the bear swung his other paw, releasing another spell immediately after his first one.

I made too wide of a movement to dodge the previous attack for me to be able to avoid this one as well.

Gritting my teeth, I willed more mana to protect my body, waiting for the brunt of the next attack.

The force of the titan bear's spell knocked me off the ground. Blood spurted from my chest as four horizontal gashes formed just below my collar bone.

"Damn," I coughed out, suppressing the searing pain. I wouldn't be able to handle any more direct hits.

I needed to get close to it, but to do that, I needed to be able to dodge the titan bear's attacks.

The titan bear, aware of my vulnerable state, began smirking confidently again. I wasn't sure how the titan bear was able to manifest those nearly imperceivable spells, but there was one way of discerning it.

Standing back up, shakily, I waited. To the titan bear, it must've looked like I had given up because its smile got even wider as it began licking its lips again in anticipation.

Just as the titan bear lifted its paw up, I firmly kicked the ground in front of me, creating a cloud of dust, covering me from view.

Four slivers immediately sliced through the dust cloud I had made between the beast and me, allowing me to just barely see how wide the attack was before I immediately used Burst Step to avoid it.

“Damn it,” I spat through gritted teeth from the sharp pangs of protest in my legs.

Rolling on the ground and back onto my feet, I prepared myself again. I knew the hitbox of one of his attacks now, and I could make do with that. However, I still needed to be able to completely dodge the attack in the least amount of movement as possible if I’m going to dodge all of his attacks and clear the distance between us.

Thoughts of Kordri’s training popped into my head, and I couldn’t help but reveal a helpless smile. Either this was some big coincidence, or Windsom was indeed a calculative devil.

I glimpsed the impatient titan bear release another attack, this time with a thrust of his paw. I immediately kicked up another cloud of dust to buy time, but the bell attached to me constantly gave away my position. Reacting immediately as a hole tore through the cloud of dust, I forced another Burst Step.

“The more you run, the more painful it’ll be for you and the less of you there’ll be left for me to eat.” The mana beast let foul chuckle that didn’t match his cute appearance.

“Okay! I won’t run anymore!” I stood still with my hands up.

I could clearly make out the almost human-like expression of a triumphant sneer on the bear’s face as it casually released another slicing attack with the swipe of its paw.

I barely had the time to swallow back a choke as I executed the modified Burst Step I had been working on.

As I willed mana into the proper muscles at the precise timing while strengthening my bones to help withstand the force of this abrupt stimulation, I heard a sharp crack from my legs before I was hit with the all-too-familiar sensation of high-speed motion just as the titan bear’s blunt spell pressed against my chest.

My body shifted less than a meter to the right, and the attack that was supposed cave my chest in just barely grazed my left shoulder.

Even more blood began flowing out from the deep gash on my left leg from the sudden pressure I had exerted to use Burst Step; a small crater had formed beneath my legs from the sheer force of the movement. Despite the success of my new movement skill, the explosion of pain that was growing increasingly unbearable had filled me with doubt.

Through sheer will and my own stubbornness to win this fight against my unruly body, I choked down the pain as I concentrated more mana to my lower body.

The titan bear stared at me, confused at first but its gaze soon turned sour as it narrowed its eyes in irritation.

Before it had the chance to release its next attack, I kicked at the ground again, creating a cloud of debris to separate us.

I had less than a second to dodge the bear's attack once it passed through the dust cloud, and I was willing to bet the next assault wouldn't be just a single attack.

In the midst of this game of dodging the lethal attacks, I had figured out the basis of successfully implementing my new Burst Step. Just as I had to coordinate the mana in my muscles to propel my body, I had to mirror the progression of mana flow in my body to stop the movement as well.

The ground underneath my feet had sunken, once again, due to the force I had to expel in order to come to a stop, but it had worked again.

The cloud of dust I had created was torn into pieces a flurry of attacks from the titan bear headed straight at me.

Burst.

My vision blurred as I propelled myself to the right. The rigid ground cracked at the force of my landing about two meters away. The first step had me gritting in pain but using Burst Step again had sent an explosion of agony through my lower body as the muscles and bones inside me nearly gave out from the stress.

Just as the bell rang, giving away my position, I locked my mouth into a determined snarl and swallowed back any screams of pain that were building up in my throat, and executed Burst Step once more to reach my opponent. The titan bear's head spun at the sound of my bell, but by that time, I had already closed the gap.

The bear's dark eyes widened as its maw opened in surprise. Through the haze of pain, I let out a brash smirk. Mana had already been concentrated into my fist to the degree that it was glowing slightly.

The titan bear flailed back. "Wai—"

My augmented fist buried itself into tiny bear's stomach, creating a loud thud on impact before the mana beast's body shot towards the edge of the ravine, crashing into the rocky cliff from where I fell.

My legs, numb from the pain, finally relented and the cold ground was soon pressed up against my cheek. Using the last of my remaining strength, I tore off the bell from my waist and crushed it in my hand before my vision darkened and an alluring call beckoned me to sleep.

WINDSOM'S POV:

Arriving down at the gorge, I inspected the scene. There was a silver panther sprawled out, dead, with the ground dyed in blood beneath it. Nearby boulders had deep gashes while there were craters in the ground and wall surrounding them.

'What exactly had happened here?' I spotted the boy on the ground and a crater depressed onto the cliff that surrounded this ravine.

'The boy came all the way down here?' Arthur was in a rather pitiful state. Tearing off the last of his tattered clothes, he had at least three broken ribs, and the gashes on his chest had reached too deep to be considered a mere flesh wound. However, the most concerning injuries were surprisingly on his legs, as they had become blotched with a sickly purple and red color from extensive internal bleeding. I couldn't make out the gravity of his wounds, but it had to be treated soon.

'Was it wrong of me to have left Arthur alone like this? Lord Indrath had ordered me to give the boy some room to grow on his own, but seeing the state he was in now, he could've died.'

After treating the boy, I focused my attention on the creature in the center of the blast radius on the ravine's rocky wall.

"Hmm?" It looked like the cub of a titan bear, but that didn't make sense. A cub of this size didn't even have the strength to defend itself; it shouldn't have been able to injure the boy like this.

A full grown titan bear would stand at least three meters tall, possessing superior defense with its thick coat, but even a full grown one wouldn't be able to cause this much devastation...

Unless...

Just as I took a closer look at the titan bear cub, its body started writhing unnaturally. Suddenly, its stomach bulged before a black tentacle erupted from inside the dead mana beast, wriggling frantically before it slumped.

“Of course.” Despite the situation, a content smile formed on my face.

“That explained everything, but to think that Arthur was able to defeat one,” I sighed.

Demon leech. It was a truly rare specimen that was as intelligent as it was foul native only to Epheotus. By itself, it was weak, but when it latched onto a mana beast, it was able to possess its body and strengthen its host’s core to ridiculous degrees.

Seeing how large the demon leech had grown inside the cub, it was easy to guess that this monster was definitely levels stronger than a mere titan bear.

The boy was lucky that the cub’s body was still fragile. If the leech had possessed a full grown titan bear...

There was no use postulating alternate possibilities. I’m sure it wasn’t done with intent, but Arthur had done right in aiming for the stomach of the cub since this was where the demon leech resided. If the leech had had the strength to make its way to Arthur’s body while he was unconscious, even Lord Indrath wouldn’t have been able to save the boy without crippling him.

Prying the demon leech from inside the corpse, I crushed the parasite in my hand.

“Here you are.” Left in my hand was a shiny white orb that the demon leech had been refining inside the titan bear.

I picked up the boy, placing the white orb inside his mouth. “Your difficulties have paid off for you tremendously, Arthur.”

Chapter 117

Steps Forward and Back

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

Even before I was able to open my eyes, the first thing I became aware of was the soft creaking of footsteps on old wood. Echoes of groaning floorboards resounded in my ears, allowing me to get a vague grasp of the size of the room I was held in.

An array of intoxicating smells—rich with unfamiliar herbs and spices—bombarded my senses, distracting me from anything else. Opening my eyes, the first thing to welcome me was the underside of a cottage roof. Besides the parched coarseness of my tongue from lack of water, my body felt fine; or at least, I thought, until I tried moving.

To my horror, there was no response when I tried to lift my legs; there was no sensation or feedback when I tried moving anything from the waist down. I immediately lifted the blankets covering my lower body, only to see that my legs had been completely bandaged and fashioned tightly to a wooden splint to keep them from moving.

“Your legs are fine, Child. I just had to numb them so that you wouldn’t be up all night from the pain,” a gentle, yet slightly brittle voice stirred my attention.

Turning to the origin of the kind voice, I was met with a tender smile from a woman well past her youth, seasoned with the signs of refined aging. While wrinkles marked her face, they did nothing to hide her dignified and graceful demeanor. Dressed in a simple gray robe to match her hair tied tightly in the back to come down in a braid, my caretaker approached me with sparkling eyes.

Letting out a sigh of relief at her words, I sank back down in the bed. “How do you feel, Child?” she cooed, placing a warm hand on my forehead.

I blinked uncomprehendingly. The last thing I remembered was landing a solid blow on the titan bear before passing out. I turned my head around, scanning my surroundings. I was in a spacious room, well-lit and heated by a fire crackling in a

stone fireplace. Beside it was a small kitchen muddled with pots and pans of all sizes either hanging on the wall or stacked high on top of each other. Besides the worn upholstered couches placed around the fireplace and a small dining table in front of the kitchen, there was little else inside this cottage.

“Confused, are you?” the aged woman chuckled.

“Yeah,” I replied hoarsely before breaking down into a fit of coughs. The woman promptly got up from her seat beside me and came back with a mug of lukewarm water. After a few deep gulps of what tasted like liquid heaven, I felt confident enough to form cohesive words.

“Thank you...”

“—Myre. You can simply call me Myre, Child,” the lady finished for me, taking the empty mug from my hands.

As I sat there, a searing pain started creeping up my legs, as if a liquid fire had soaked them.

Mistaking my pained expression for fright, Myre let out a soft chuckle. “Don’t worry, I won’t eat you. Although, I did technically kind of steal you away from Windsom. Lucky I did, though. If I had gotten my hands on you any later, I’m afraid your legs would’ve taken a lot longer to heal.”

“I-It’s not that. My legs...” I managed to voice out through gritted teeth.

“Seems like the medicinal rub has lost its effect already.” Placing the mug down on the nightstand beside me, Myre began to lift the only thing keeping me from being completely naked.

My hands immediately reached down to cover myself between my legs, which prompted another soft chuckle from my caretaker. Carefully folding the sheets so that only my legs were exposed, she gently hovered her hand over my bandaged legs.

As Myre began unwrapping the bandages, I was able to finally see the full extent of injuries my legs had incurred. I couldn’t help but grow puzzled by the sight of my bare legs. Scars that I never had were strewn across both legs. My knees and ankles had the most cuts, but what confused me most was that these scars looked as if they’d been on my legs for years.

Cold sweat began forming on my forehead as the pain in my legs got worse. Myre began carefully inspecting every inch of my legs after completely removing all of the bandages.

After a satisfied nod to herself, she brought over a bucket filled with a very pungent herbal liquid. I wordlessly observed my caretaker as she diligently cut and soaked strips of cloth and bandaged my legs with nimble fingers. I couldn't help but fall into a trance from her rhythmic and dexterous movements.

"Elder Myre—"

"Please, Arthur, I would much prefer if you just called me Myre," she cut me off, her attention still focused on my legs.

"Er, Myre, how long have I been unconscious for?" I asked, afraid that by my seemingly repaired legs, I'd been out for a long time.

"Just over two nights, My Dear." As she finished replacing the last bandage on my left calf, she turned to me, her misty green eyes studying me. "Now, how does that feel?"

"Much more comfortable. Thank you," I assured gratefully as the pain began subsiding from the cold gel-like liquid soaked into the new bandages.

Accepting my gratitude with a placid smile, she gathered the used cloth and dumped it in a basin filled with water. After pouring some salt-like powder into it, she lifted her dress and stepped inside, using her feet to launder the used cloth.

"Myre, you must be exhausted. Let me wash that for you," I hurriedly expressed as I willed mana into my hand, preparing to manipulate the water in the basin.

"No no, it's fine, My Dear. Doing this gives these old bones a chance to get some exercise." She waved my help away with one hand as her other still held the ends of her dress.

As I continued staring blankly at her stomping on the drenched cloth, I couldn't help but ask, "Myre, am I—are we—still in Epheotus?"

"Why of course we are, Child. Where else would you have been able to mend the sorry state of your legs?" Myre answered, maintaining her rhythmic stepping in the basin.

“My apologies, it’s just that...” My eyes fell to her feet.

“Oh. Well, I suppose it would be easier to do everything I have been doing with mana arts, but what fun is that? Even as asuras, there are things that magic can’t simulate. For example, the coldness of the water between my toes as the wet cloths wrap around my feet. What fun is waving your finger to move the water to do that for you?” she expressed, giving me a wink.

Her words baffled me, but I couldn’t hope to understand the perspective of an ancient race where magic was ingrained into their very being. “I’m sorry, it’s just that waking up in this state was rather confusing to me. Not to be rude, and I’m very thankful for your meticulous care, but I just thought that maybe healing mana art would have quickened the process of my recovery.”

“If a simple healing spell had been cast on you, you’d be barely limping, and your bones would’ve taken on an entirely different shape,” the elder chuckled as she willed a towel into her hands with a snap.

Walking towards me, she curled her lips into a mischievous smile. “Besides, I did use mana art to mend your legs.”

Myre flicked her arm at me and, faster than I was able to react, an icy blast seared through my chest.

I immediately sprawled back on the bed, wide-eyed as I stared at the silvery mist that had engulfed the wound I had gotten from the titan bear. As the fire diminished, the once bleeding gashes across my rib cage began healing rapidly.

A musical laughter snapped me out of my daze, and I glanced down to see Myre failing to hold in her amusement. “Gets them every time!” she sighed, her hands still enveloped in the silvery mist.

“H-How?” I blubbered, my fingers tracing the once open cuts that grew smaller and became completely encrusted in scabs.

“A lady needs to have her secrets, My Dear.” Her voice softened as she coquettishly pressed a finger to her lips. Despite her old age, I couldn’t help but blush diffidently at her playful behavior.

Coughing down my embarrassment, I sat back up, albeit covering a little more of

myself with the blanket. "Thank you for treating me, Myre, as well as your hospitality. I know there isn't much room here."

"Not at all. Besides, this old cottage isn't where I live. I merely use this place to get some peace and, from time to time, treat a patient," she smiled, handing me a bowl of warm soup. "I don't treat just anyone you know, but I wanted to meet the human boy who is supposedly the savior of the world," she declared grandly before shooting me another wink.

Replying with a weak chuckle, I took a careful sip from the bowl. Immediately, a savory broth laced with refreshing hints of herbs enveloped my tongue, enticing me to greedily take another large gulp before setting it down on the nightstand.

"Don't even try to get up tonight. The wounds on your legs weren't as simple as the little gashes on your chest. It took hours for your legs to get back in that state, so just get some rest; that is your biggest priority," Myre warned. "There is water on the counter within arm's reach, and if you have to use the bathroom, there is a chamber pot right beside the bed. Good night, My Dear."

Myre left me to my thoughts with the only source of light, the flames, writhing in the fireplace. It seemed like I had just closed my eyes for a second, thinking back to the silver flame she had conjured, when I was jerked awake from another pang of sharp throbs. The pain wasn't as intense as it had been when Myre had changed the bandages for me, but it was agitating enough to keep me from falling back asleep. The cottage was almost completely dark aside from the few strands of moonlight that made it through the thatched roof.

The fire had long gone out, with only a faint, smoky aroma left. I wasn't sure to what degree my wounds had healed, but I grew restless at the thought of idly wasting away time.

Abandoning the idea of going back to sleep, I sat back, upright, and began doing the only productive thing I could do in this state: meditate.

As I concentrated on the mana core swirling deep in my sternum, a blast of unfamiliar energy welcomed me. Suddenly, the mountain that I had been chipping away at to reach the silver core was but a flat plain, rolled out like a map for me to cross.

Absorbing mana from my surroundings, I tentatively began refining when the alien

energy began hungrily sucking in the mana I had absorbed and coalesced it with my mana core. The light yellow hue of my core started glowing as mana surged throughout my body, filling my veins, muscles, bones, and skin with a fiery energy.

I could feel myself shivering uncontrollably as my core began glowing brighter until it wasn't yellow, but instead, a bright silver.

The untamed energy that had been raging inside my body continued to chip away at the layers of my core, making my silver core grow brighter and brighter with each influx of energy that hit. I held my breath, afraid that even the slightest shift would halt the rapid progression of my mana core. Eventually, the mysterious energy source that had refined my mana core to the peak of mid-silver stage subsided.

Just when I thought the transformation had finished, the sharp scream of a metal clang filled my ears. As if an invisible wall that had been restraining my mind was gone, my body forcibly shifted into the second phase of Sylvia's Dragon Will.

Prying my eyes open, I could see the golden runes emerging from my arms and shoulders. To my surprise, the glowing runes began changing, their design growing more complex as they shaped themselves into some kind of ancient language. My disheveled hair started changing colors from my naturally auburn hair to white, then back to auburn again.

The furniture inside the one-room cottage started trembling as straw and splinters fell from the roof, filling the room with more rays of moonlight. However, despite the pots and pans clanging against one another, the only sound that filled my ears was the high-pitched ring.

While my hair changed back to its original color, the newly-formed runes on my body glowed brighter as the color began to drain from the world. Soon, the only colors I was able to see were in the minuscule particles floating around me. But something had changed. During the times that I had used Dragon's Awakening, I was only able to see four colors: one for each of the four elements. However, specks of purple were dotted abundantly within the array of blue, yellow, red, and green.

After using this form to kill Lucas, I thought I had gotten better at controlling the harsh compulsions that came with using the second phase of Sylvia's will. However, the will seemed to reject my body more than ever, until I couldn't bear the agony of my body ripping itself apart anymore.

I released Dragon's Awakening, and as if a bucket of water had been thrown to douse a raging fire, all of the energy, power, and pain that had been growing larger and larger inside me abruptly vanished. An eerie silence surrounded me as I was left feeling confused, powerless and frail despite the progress my mana core had made.

Chapter 118

The Glass Of Water

“So it’s true.” I turned my head to see Myre leaning against the entryway. “You truly have inherited Realmheart...” The asura’s voice was both solemn and sentimental as it trailed off.

“Excuse me? Realmheart?” I echoed as she approached me with slow steps.

“The physical manifestations displayed from you tapping into Sylvia’s powers, My Dear— the iris glowing purple and those unmistakable glowing runes imprinted on the body. Even within the clan, it is rare. Realmheart—or The Realmheart Physique—is an ability that only the Indrath Clan bloodline can possess. Tell me, Child, were you able to see them?” the asura pressed as her eyes stayed glued to the faint markings which continued to fade from my arms.

Myre reached out and tenderly ran her fingers along the runes. “I’m sorry, but I don’t understand. See what?” I replied, snapping her out of her daze.

“Were you able to see all five of the colors that make up the physical realm?” The asura had an expression I couldn’t quite make out as she awaited my answer.

I thought back to the array of colors that floated around me while in my second phase. “I think so...”

“The Realmheart Physique was named by the ancestors of the Indrath Clan because, in this form, the user’s attunement with the physical realm is said to be unparalleled. While the ability itself does not hold much strength, the power to activate Realmheart allows the user to gain knowledge and insight that those without could never hope to have,” Myre explained. “Which goes to say that knowledge truly is power.”

I reflected back to when I had first used Realmheart against the elderwood guardian. I had assumed that the form was a just a power boost, allowing me to gain access to more mana, but from what Myre had just explained to me, it seemed like using Realmheart actually just allow me to utilize mana with much more efficiency. “There is one thing I don’t quite understand. When I used the second phase—Realmheart—

last time, I was only able to see four colors. Why am I now able to see the purple particles?"

Myre pondered for a moment.

"Are you not allowed to tell me about this as well? It seems like none of the asuras want a lesser being learning their techniques and secrets," I sighed, disappointed.

"Mmm, we asuras are prideful beings indeed. Even amongst the members of the same race, we asuras stay secretive and greedy, the Indrath Clan particularly so." Myre chuckled for a bit then gave me an inquisitive look. "I won't say that I'm different from all of them, but I've lived long enough and experienced far too much to care about such frivolousness. If you'll be content with an old lady like me, I'll be happy to teach you a thing or two."

I honestly didn't expect her to go as far as offering to teach me, but taking no chances, I immediately bobbed my head in consent before she could change her mind.

"Good! Now... practical lessons won't be possible in your current state, but I think a more theoretical approach might be good either way," Myre answered, tapping her chin with a finger.

Myre explained to me the fundamentals of mana itself and how it affected the world, or what she referred to as "the physical realm." Much of what she went over was something I had already known to a certain degree. However, the way she strung her words together and explained everything in such an easily digestible manner, it was obvious that she was much more knowledgeable than any of the professors at Xyrus Academy.

She went on, clarifying how it wasn't natural for lesser beings or even asuras to manipulate raw mana. Mages with a certain affinity to an element had a much easier time absorbing the atmospheric mana that coincided with their particular element. However, in the end, it still had to be absorbed and refined in order for to be utilized. To someone with the Realmheart physique, a fire-affinity mage will appear to be absorbing only the red mana particles, but after completing the refining process, the mana would appear white when first used. This was why body-strengthening spells could be used regardless of what type of affinity a mage was.

"So if, in the end, mana that is absorbed and refined turns white, how come it's not

possible for them to utilize different elements?" I inquired.

"Good question." Myre seemed pleased by my interruption, rather than annoyed. "It is impossible to control the specific type of element that a mage absorbs, so it is inevitable that the mage will naturally take in the mana particles that his body is most inclined towards.

"Let's say that a mage's affinity is towards water; during the process of refining raw mana, the amount of water element his body absorbs will be disproportionate compared to the other elements. So, even though the end result is a purified white mana, during the stage where that mage refined the water elemental mana his body absorbed, the raw mana altered his body to become more predisposed, and his mind to become more insightful of that particular element."

It must've been obvious that I looked a bit confused, because she explained it in more detail.

"Remember when you conjured your first remote spell, whether that be a stream of fire or a sphere of wind? You had to concentrate much more in order for the spell to manifest in the proper form, right? Even infant asuras are taught to verbally chant spells to help them concentrate and visualize what they want. However, after so much time absorbing and refining a specific element, the need to visualize and chant becomes much easier and comes more naturally.

Going back to the water-affinity mage scenario, that mage—no doubt—would have to concentrate on the shape, proportion, density, and even the speed of launch if he were to execute a fireball. However, that same mage will have no trouble raising a stream of water, separating it into multiple orbs and casting it to barrage down on an enemy with just a flick of his wrist. Why?"

"Because of the influence that absorbing a majority of water element had on the mage during the refining process," I answered.

"Correct! Being exposed to a particular element for so long, the mage would no doubt gain insight during their meditation." Myre continued on about this subject, stressing heavily again that asuras and lesser beings alike could not manipulate natural mana. After hours passed unheeded on the subject of mana, Myre finally brought up what I had wanted to know most about: aether.

Rather than start from the beginning, Myre asked, “Can you tell me what you know about aether?”

I proceeded to explain what little I knew about aether and the times I had experienced the phenomena that aether produced: the instances where I was able to freeze time using the first phase of Sylvia’s will and how I had trained using the aether orb.

“Aether is fundamentally different from mana; this much is clear to anyone. While both entities make up the world that we live in, aether works very differently than mana. To what degree, no one has a solid answer. Some have speculated that aether is the building block that the world is made of, while mana is what fills it with life and sustenance. More simply put, aether would be the cup, while mana is the water that fills it.” Myre held up a glass cup, filled halfway, for me to see.

“It is quite easy to manipulate the water inside without mana, but much more difficult to change the shape of the cup without breaking it. Quite a crude analogy, I know,” the asura smiled as she began slowly shaking the cup, stirring the water inside.

Shaking my head, I responded, “No, it helps a lot.”

“Good. Well, despite the many speculations and theories, even the Indrath Clan, hailed for being the most adept in utilizing aether, has no solid theory that can justify what they are able to do. What they did have that no one else did, was the ability to physically detect aether through the use of the Realmheart Physique.” Holding the glass close to her face, Myre dipped a finger in the water. “Those in the physical realm cannot sense aether. Everyone alike knows that there are laws that hold our world together, just like this glass that holds the water. However, it is impossible for them to fathom the boundaries that exist to keep order in the world.”

“Then the purple particles I saw when I used Realmheart...” I said, trailing off at the end.

“Yes, My Dear. That was aether.” Myre smiled. “Through the use of Realmheart, you are able to see the glass cup from within, the boundaries of this world.”

“Now, I can go on to explain the history of how aether came to be slowly studied, but I doubt that will be of any use to you. You just have to know that you possess a skill that even asuras would kill for. However, I suspect that there will be certain limits because your body is not of the dragon race. But the true power of Realmheart lies in the ability

to gain insight while in the form.”

“I noticed that while I use Realmheart, I become a lot stronger. At first, I thought it was some sort of power boost that the form gives, but it’s more of a big improvement in control,” I confirmed with Myre, who nodded in reply.

“Yes, especially for you, who has the strange composition of being quadra-elemental, there is a vast difference in mana manipulation using Realmheart. But let’s set aside the aspect of mana for now. Not to sound biased, but control over mana is much more linear than aether. For mana, the greater your core is, the more water you can manipulate,” she continued, still using the glass-of-water analogy. “Your insight and mental aptitude is how many ways you can manipulate the water inside. However, through the manipulation of aether, we can control the cup itself. Do you understand?”

“How would you manipulate the world itself?” I pressed.

“It’s become habit to say ‘manipulate,’ but in actuality, it is more important to think of it as influencing aether. And you’ve already had a taste of this quite a few times, My Dear. Windsom had mentioned you being able to stop time for a brief moment.” Myre set the cup down and distanced herself from where I was.

“Yes! That was actually the first ability I was able to use with Sylvia’s will!” I exclaimed.

“The control over time, aevum; the authority over space, spatium; and the influence over all living components, vivum...” Myre recited. “These are the three components that make up aether.”

This was knowledge that I might perhaps never come across again, so I hungrily absorbed every word the asura was saying.

“No matter how powerful, how insightful, and how lucky a practitioner may be, he will only be able to master one path. Ancestors of the Indrath Clan have lived all their lives trying to gain insight on one of the three paths, only to realize that they don’t have the capability of mastering it. However, over time, we’ve realized a way for some asuras to know where their aptitude lies,” the asura confessed.

“How?” We had reached the climax of the story and I was greedy for more.

“The runes that run down the body from using Realmheart.” Myre closed her eyes and went silent.

A palpable force suddenly pushed down on my shoulders, forcing me to use my arms to keep myself sitting up on the bed. The air turned thick and heavy as I stayed seated on the bed in awe. The pressure that Myre was emitting was neither violent nor ferocious like Kordri's had been, yet, in terms of level, it was much more overwhelming. I had no confidence that I would be able to muster up the will to fight against her—that much was clear. It was as if I could almost see her transforming into dragon form.

Golden runes began carving down her bare arm but they looked very different from mine. Whereas mine appeared complex and detailed, her runes flowed like branches of an elven tree, or interconnecting streams of water being woven together.

Myre finally opened her eyes and stared at me with an icy gaze of radiant lavender. "These runes are different for each Realmheart user, but the markings, when studied, show that I am of the vivum path. And that is also why I could heal you."

I found myself unable to muster a response as I stared in awe. Her very presence felt different than mine when I had activated Realmheart; the runes that ran down her arm were much more vivid and bright compared to the dull glow I had when I used this profound power, and her eyes seemed to almost pulse, as if they had a mind of their own.

"Now, My Dear, activate your Realmheart," the asura gently nudged, despite her intimidating presence.

Chapter 119

Bearer of Grim News

An indescribably chilling sensation burst out from within my mana core as I activated Realmheart. Liquid frost coursed through my veins, desperately seeking a way out of my body. I watched the golden runes begin to form on my arms, glowing hotly against my frigid skin as my vision began to achromatize.

“I was only able to catch a glimpse of what your runes looked like earlier, but it truly is fascinating,” Myre mumbled to herself as she studied me.

Remaining seated and motionless as my caretaker continued to inspect the engravings on my body, I couldn’t help but become enthralled at what I was experiencing. This was the first time that I had actually taken a step back to study the changes in my perception while using Realmheart; watching the different particles move as if they each contained intellect and a goal in mind made me realize why magic was more accurately described as “mana manipulation” in this world.

Testing out a hunch I had in mind, I willed a small ember to appear at the tip of my finger. Sure enough, the red particles around me began to react as I conjured the fire. Even though what I had used was the refined mana from my core, there was a definitive response to the particles around my finger. I did this using spells from different elements to see the response in the particles, but no matter what I did, only the purple specks remained unchanged.

“Having fun, are we?” The asura was still in her Realmheart form as well. Her soft purple eyes peered through me as the edges of her lips curled upward in amusement.

“How is it that I’ve never noticed this?” I asked, more to myself than to her.

“It’s understandable that you would assume that this form was some power-up rather than a means to observe and study what cannot normally be perceived.” Letting go of my arm that she had been examining, Myre took a few steps back. “I’m not exactly sure how long you’re able to stay in this form now that you’ve broken through to a stage where you can sense aether, but there are a few things I want you to see before you release Realmheart.”

The asura raised a hand in front of her for me to see, her eyes narrowed in concentration. Suddenly, the purple particles around us that had refused to comply to my will slowly began to drift towards Myre. The movements of each tiny glimmer of purple seemed to differ from one another. Rather than manipulating mana, it appeared more like the asura was herding in a legion of tiny fireflies toward her hand.

“As I mentioned earlier, aether behaves fundamentally different from mana. You will be met with only failure if you try to manipulate aether as you have done with mana. Let me reiterate my point with the cup-of-water analogy since it has worked so well for us until now. You can drink, gargle, and spit out water as long as you know how, but you would be a fool if you tried the same thing with the cup. Aether is present all around us, yet it is the very boundary that confines us to the limits you and I have,” she explained as the particles of aether began drifting around the hand that she held up until it was completely enveloped. “Vivum, the influence over all living components. This is the very power I had used to piece back together your shattered legs.”

The silver mist that Myre had shot out at me in demonstration earlier looked like a purple cloud surrounding her hand while I was in Realmheart. However, when she released her influence over the aether, the tiny particles dispersed back to their original space.

“I saw the aether gathering in your hand, but how does that form into vivum? How did that heal my legs?” A million and more questions were running through my head. On one end, being able to witness and perceive this spectacle was truly a good fortune, but seeing this just filled me with frustration at my lack of comprehension.

“Subsequent to finding out that my affinity lied toward the branch of life, I studied vivum for centuries. However, even then, I am unconfident that I would be able to explain to you what you truly wish to know,” she confessed solemnly. “What I can explain with certainty is limited.”

“I want to learn.” I stared at her, determined to grasp what I could.

While her eyes remained solemn, a slight smile formed. “Very well. First thing you need to know is that, unlike mana, you cannot absorb aether; you are merely changing its presence and influence to reality.”

“Does that mean a core isn’t needed to be able to influence aether?”

“An individual’s core is what connects the body to the physical realm, so while aether isn’t directly manipulated in the way that mana is, the mana core is crucial,” she responded. While Myre’s words were simple enough, they reflected a deep wisdom that couldn’t be compared to mine.

“You will realize your path when the time comes, but since you are still in the beginning stages of your cultivation, it is best not to overwhelm you with knowledge that is unnecessary for now,” she continued, smiling gently at me. “For now, just know that after a certain extent, your cultivation will cease to depend on the rote ability to refine mana, but depend on gaining insight into knowledge that cannot be passed down.”

I pondered over her cryptic words. My brain was itching with questions but I knew now wasn’t the time to be asking them.

She nodded in contentment as I waited for her to continue. “I’m not sure if this is mere coincidence or fate, but there is a reason why you can—as limited as it is—utilize aether. Can you guess what it is?”

“I thought it was because of Sylvia’s will?” I answered.

“It is partly because of Sylvia’s will that you are able to bear the burden of aether, but not the reason you are able to manipulate it.”

There was only one other answer that came to mind. “Is it because I’m able to manipulate all four elements?”

“Precisely!” Myre praised. “It is through the ability to gain insight into all four of the fundamental elements that we were able to take a look beyond the water and realize the glass cup that we are held in.”

“Doesn’t that mean dragons are much stronger than the other races?” I remarked.

Shaking her head, the asura clarified. “We certainly hold a fair advantage over the other race. We dragons have the ability to control aether, but to what extent? Even the most powerful dragons are only able to scratch the boundless surface of what aether can possibly do. However, the other races hold much deeper insight into the element that they are predisposed to compared to dragons.”

I wasn’t sure how long we had been talking but I began to feel my strength leaving me

from using Realmheart. Noticing my strained expression, Myre expressed that it was okay for me to withdraw the ability.

Color began permeating back into the world as I released Realmheart, and as always, the runes were the last to disappear. “So, Myre, have you found out what ability of aether is best suited for me?” I asked, letting out a relieved breath.

“Yes, but before you get too excited, allow me to forewarn you that even I cannot predict whether or not you will be able to consciously control aether like we can. Even though you do possess the ability to manipulate all four elements and have gained both a dragon’s will and the Realmheart Physique, you are still a human.” While her message was harsh, her words held no pretension or condescension.

“I see,” I muttered. I would’ve been lying if I said I wasn’t disappointed. In a world of not just humans but other races—more powerful ones—that coexisted, I was beginning to see this invisible ceiling that I had been ignorant of in my past life.

“Like I had mentioned before, you cannot compare aether to mana. Aether can be thought of as an organism, almost sentient, that needs to be coaxed and coerced into action. Because of this, the manipulation of aether places a heavy burden on the caster. You’ve probably felt this every time you used the time manipulation ability.”

“You’re right. And no matter how many times I’ve used it, it doesn’t get any easier,” I confessed, leaning against the wooden headboard of my bed.

“And I doubt it ever will. My dear, although I’m unsure as to why the ability to manipulate time, albeit briefly, showed itself to you, you were never meant to go down the route of aevum.” Taking out a pen and a small parchment from the nightstand drawer, she began drawing some symbols. “Arthur, you were able to tap into aether manipulation only because of Sylvia’s will, but I imagine that you weren’t able to get a grasp of how it works.”

“In terms of theory, I still have no idea as to how it occurs,” I acknowledged reluctantly. Using the first phase of Sylvia’s will allowed me to stop time for a brief moment but whenever I had used that ability, it felt like I was simply looking at a manuscript in a foreign language: I knew what it looked like, but I had no idea how to read it or what it meant.

“This is why.” Myre held up the small paper she had been writing on, revealing an array

of familiar symbols. “Just like Sylvia had, you were meant to control the very fabric of the boundaries that keeps the physical realm in place; you are of the spatium genus.”

Despite the revelation, I wasn't happy. Not at all. “But, as you've said, regardless of this knowledge, it's still fairly possible that I wouldn't be able to consciously control this ability.”

Myre regarded me with a solemn gaze but didn't respond.

“From what you've told me so far, I was only able to even use the time manipulation ability because it was pre-embedded into the will that Sylvie imparted to me before she was killed.” I was doing my best to contain my frustration, but my voice was growing steadily louder. “Please, Myre. Tell me what I need to do. So far, everything you've told me about this grand ability is that I have the qualifications for it, but because of the physical limitations of my species, I wouldn't be able to handle the burden!”

The asura stayed quiet for long time, doing nothing else but combing softly through my ruffled hair. “I truly pity you, Child. You have such an overwhelming potential for greatness, but your capacity is hindered by something you cannot control. The reason I told you everything that I have is not to mock you for something you will never be able to accomplish, but rather to encourage you to do something beyond the ordinary. Even as you progress into the white stage and beyond, you may be unable to control aether like dragons can, but that does not mean you do not have that ability at your disposal. Knowledge is an immeasurable strength that can overcome the boundaries that even asuras place on themselves.”

“You're right, I'm sorry for taking my frustrations out on you. I know you only mean to do what is best for me,” I whispered.

“Yes, my child. Only what is best for you,” she echoed. When I looked up at Myre, however, her face was lined deeply with an expression of sorrow.

“What's wrong?”

“Arthur. I have broken many rules by imparting all this knowledge to you. This knowledge can certainly be used against the dragon race if it fell into the wrong hands, so please believe me when I say that I truly do wish for what is best for you.”

I still couldn't figure out why Myre had shown so much care for me since the

beginning, but if there was one thing I had learned in my previous life, it was being able to read the intentions of those around me. The asura meant well despite the fact that we knew very little of each other.

“Even if Realmheart cannot be utilized to its full extent, it can become an irreplaceable asset in the coming battles through its sensory functions. With Realmheart, your ability to manipulate all four elements, as well as your remarkable combat prowess, you have many tools at your disposal to take advantage of...” Myre’s voice trailed off, filling me with apprehension for her next words.

“But?” I asked.

Letting out a deep breath, she took a moment and stared into my eyes. “But this movement technique that you’ve created, the one that placed you into my home in that horrid state... cannot be one of them.”

As if her words weren’t clear enough already, she clarified for me once more.

“Never use that technique again.”

Chapter 120

Opportunities to Learn

Even at Myre's ominous warning, I had remained silent—numb, almost. I had a hunch that this might've been the case after ending up here, but her words made this predicament all too real.

My mind spun, trying to weave together a string of reasons to refute the asura's verdict. However, none came to mind. Regardless of how much mana I infused to strengthen my body, what I was doing with Burst Step was directly stimulating the muscles to such a degree that, apparently, it would tear them—and my bones—to pieces."

"I always thought this world held the potential for limitless possibilities, and magic would be at the epicenter of it all. But I see now that no matter where you end up, there is always a ceiling, keeping those who wish to venture into the unknown caged in," I sighed, looking up at the wooden ceiling above us.

"I know that you spent a lot of time developing this mana art, and it's rude of me to pry this secret out of you, but how does your movement technique exactly work?" Myre queried, a twinkle of interest apparent in her hazy green eyes.

I first told her how I came across the idea of the skill. Myre already knew the foundations of Mirage Walk, which the Thyestes Clan had engineered, which saved me some time. I then explained the basic mechanics of how I improved Mirage Walk from its initial concept. Mirage Walk was simply a passive skill that was used to hide the user's mana fluctuation. Recounting the months I had spent trying to get even a consistent handle on Burst Step sent a painful ache down my chest as it finally hit me that all of that was for naught.

It had been the first time I had developed a mana art that went beyond the boundaries of this world, since it was only possible with the knowledge I had from my previous life. But I couldn't tell her that. Instead, I told her how I first came across the idea..."

"Fascinating," said Myre, deep in her own thoughts. "To utilize the intricacies of the body to such a degree... I would've never thought of something like that."

“I was shocked to see your body in such a state at first, but after you’ve explained to me how this movement technique worked, it’s a wonder that your legs haven’t been permanently crippled,” she continued, still in awe.

“It doesn’t matter now, does it? I can’t use this skill without shattering my body and tearing up my muscles, so I’ll have to think of some other way to prepare for this upcoming war,” I shrugged, trying to keep my bitterness from showing on my face. “Feel free to use it, Myre. As a thank you for healing my legs.”

“My child, I have to say that I have very little confidence in being able to replicate what you’ve just explained to me. The sheer amount of control and intricate fine-tunings that one would need to properly execute this Burst Step is beyond my grasp,” she confessed with a chuckle. “I’ve grown complacent with old age. I have sought out the hidden mysteries of vivum, abandoning the practical uses of mana long ago. Rest assured, the secrets of this skill will end with me.”

“Thank you.” Her words offered little comfort to my current dilemma. “Myre, I’m feeling a bit drowsy since I haven’t had the chance to sleep...”

“Of course, my dear,” the asura answered immediately. Casting one last sympathetic gaze, she blew out the candles lighting the room, and left.

With the absence of firelight, the hut darkened, and my eyes could only make out the thin pillars of moonlight that made it past the thatched roof. The specks, dust, and ashes from the smoldering remains in the fireplace danced in the streams of soft, white light, filling the small space with an alluring ambience.

Telling Myre that I wanted to sleep was a lie. Sleeping was the last thing I wanted to do; I had already wasted enough time as it was.

I closed my eyes, analyzing my current situation.

My breakthrough into the silver core stage was more than a pleasant surprise since my core was refined to the mid-level stage. The amount of mana I could now utilize through this advancement, along with the help of Mana Rotation, was several times higher than it had previously been since coming to this continent. My hand-to-hand combat abilities had also made quite a leap forward thanks to Kordri, which, coupled with my sword mastery, would place me easily into the AA-class as an adventurer even without the use of elemental magic.

Despite all of this, however, I had little to show in terms of improvement in magic or mana arts. I was hoping to learn a thing or two about how mana was manipulated differently by asuras, but so far, I had learned next to nothing in that area. The asuras had provided me with a great means to train in the best environment possible to make sure I was heading in the right direction, but they seemed less than willing to impart any secrets to their fluency in mana manipulation.

Mirage Walk was the only technique I had managed to piece together, and while it was an important asset, it would have little impact in a large-scale battle.

There was an inevitable connotation of mystery and wonder when it came to mana manipulation; not nearly as much as aether, but still there. While Dicathen was a place of unimaginable sights and possibilities compared to my previous world, it goes to say that, compared to Epheotus or even Alacrya, my home continent was an infant in terms of knowledge and comprehension of mana.

There were actual asuras that resided in Alacrya, and it's safe to assume that, through the ages, they've imparted their knowledge of mana to the inhabitants. Coming from the perspective of a war leader, if Agrona wanted to take over Dicathen, he needed enough forces to not only successfully invade our continent, but also enough to protect his Clan from the asuras of Epheotus who, I can safely assume, were eagerly waiting for the Vritras to show some sign of weakness.

To be able to successfully accomplish his goals, he needed the lesser races of his continent to be stronger than the ones in Dicathen. While the Alacryan forces would be limited to how many they could afford to send on the long expedition across the sea, or through other means, what I wanted to know was how much more powerful they were.

I became curious of the exact intel that Cynthia Goodsky had provided to the asuras and leading figures in Dicathen. I was sure they were making proper defensive measures, but until I was briefed on the available intel, I would be left to blindly wonder about the enemy forces' abilities.

It was daunting as my thoughts shifted over to the capabilities that the Four Scythes and their retainers held. The report that Windsom had relayed to me said that a retainer was capable of wiping out a team led by a Lance.

Was I able to kill a retainer with my level of power right now? I wasn't sure. Alea

Triscan, the Lance who had been killed, was at the white stage. Although her mana core development was due to the artifacts bestowed onto each of the Lances, it still gave her a considerable amount of raw power to utilize. To be able to so easily kill her, even with the skills that I have harnessed during my training here, I knew better than to underestimate a retainer.

The rest of the night was an indistinguishable mixture of vague lucidness and moments of fitful sleep. Before I knew it, the cottage was filled with a warm light from the morning sun.

Reaching over to the empty pail by the side of my bed, I put it on my lap. Using mana to gather water into my palms, I splashed my face in hopes to stir myself awake.

“I take it that you had a rough night?” Myre’s voice chimed from the edge of the hut.

“Can you tell?” I joked, feeling a bit more refreshed from the crisp water.

“The shadows beneath your eyes have practically reached your chin,” she chuckled, walking over to me.

Removing the sheet covering me, she carefully began unwrapping the bandages on my leg. I noticed that her eyes had turned the same lavender shade as they had when she used Realmheart as she inspected me carefully.

“Good, the bones in your legs have been set in place well enough for me to fully treat them now. I had to work in parts in case the bones and muscles decided to start mending improperly.” With that, Myre’s hands began glowing the same silvery hue from when she demonstrated her use of aether. She ran her hands down my legs, leaving traces of the silvery mist behind. Slowly, the mist began penetrating through my skin and sinking into my legs.

At first, there was only a slight tingle as my once-numbed legs began getting their feeling back. However, it wasn’t long until that mild tingle intensified into an excruciating pain that seemed to sear through every inch of my legs. If I hadn’t known that Myre was actually mending my legs, I would’ve been tempted to cut them off right then and there. The fact that I had been holding in the need to urinate didn’t help the sheer discomfort followed by the waves of escalating pain.

My legs didn’t feel like they were getting healed. Instead, it felt like the asura was growing me a pair of new legs in the most painful way possible.

“Gah!” I let out a choked cry as I clawed at the bed in hopes to distract myself from the pain.

“I should’ve warned you about the pain, but I’m basically forcing your body to heal itself at a hyper-increased rate. With the broken tendons and muscles trying to reattach themselves to the bones, you can guess why you’re feeling the way you do.” The asura held her attention to my legs as beads of sweat began forming above her thin brows.

The pain lasted for approximately ten minutes until it started to slowly subside. By the end of the treatment, I was gingerly flexing my toes. With the consent of Myre, I brought my legs to the edge of the bed, carefully putting on weight one foot at a time before I tried standing up. Immediately, my legs buckled at the unaccustomed weight, as I fell on my side.

“Be careful. Your legs are fully healed, but you’ve lost a lot of muscles in your lower body through this treatment. You might not be used to how weak they are.” Myre spoke evenly.

“There’s no pain or discomfort, at least,” I replied, unable to hide the excitement in my voice. My legs did feel weaker, but that would only be temporary. I had full control.

“This does not change the fact that you cannot use Burst Step anymore. I will not be able to mend you when you are in Dicathen and each time, it’ll be harder for me to heal them.”

“I understand.” I tried my hands again at the simple task of standing up; this time I was able to keep myself upright, although my legs did start trembling. After an hour or so of steadily hobbling around inside the cottage, leaning against the nearby furnitures and walls for support, I knew what I had to do. I immediately went outside to the back of the cottage to relieve myself, spending a few minutes outside to stretch, taking in the crisp morning air that smelled of dew.

“I thought about what you said yesterday, my dear,” Myre spoke out from the porch. “Concerning your inability to act on the information I disclosed to you.”

Shaking my head, I replied, “I’m sorry about that, Myre; I said that out of frustration. What you told me was something that I would never be able to learn elsewhere. To the point where I realized how far behind Dicathen is in terms of knowledge of mana.”

“Compared to how short it has been since the inhabitants of Dicathen began experimenting with mana through the artifacts we gave them, they’ve come a long way.” Walking out of the hut, she waved for me to follow, making her way towards a perfectly tended and trimmed lawn of grass.

“Even I am limited in what I am allowed to disclose, but since this is something you already have, nudging you in the right direction is all I’ll be doing,” she said, standing a few meters away from me.

“I’m not following,” I replied, studying our surroundings. There was nothing around except dense clusters of trees towering over us, making the cottage and trimmed front lawn look very out of place.

“Don’t worry. I’ve already told Windsom that I’ll be borrowing you for a bit longer.” The air changed around us, and near instantly, Myre activated her Realmheart. The light-gold runes glowed softly beneath her sleeves as her misty green eyes shifted into a radiant lavender. “Now, my boy, using whichever combination of every magical spell you have under your belt, hit me with all you have.”

Looking at the frail and thin Myre standing in the field of grass, I hesitated at her command. However, a dreadful pressure erupted from the same frail-looking asura that wiped out any concerns I had of injuring her. It felt more like I’d be the one in danger if I didn’t comply with her instructions.

“Okay.” I gathered mana into my hands, but before they could even form the spell I had intended to conjure, Myre’s voice rang from a distance.

“In your right palm, you’re preparing a compressed water sphere while your left hand will shoot a small gust of wind. Child, I asked that you hit me with all you have.”

She had been spot on.

Ignoring her taunts, I fired my two spells and immediately concentrated on the area beneath her feet.

“You are planning on rupturing the ground under me, which is a clever idea, but I would appreciate it if you didn’t ruin the grass,” she interjected after casually avoiding my two spells. Myre stomped the ground softly and before my spell could even take effect, she had already cancelled it.

My mouth gaped just a bit before I regained my composure. My mind shifted back yesterday when she explained how Realmheart could be utilized to heighten perception, but I had never expected it to be to this degree.

“Like I said. This is an ability that you already have,” she chuckled, tapping her temple. “I’m simply going to be nudging you in the right direction.”

Chapter 121

The Last Mentor

“You didn’t look out for the spell behind you, my dear,” Myre reprimanded. “Proper interpretation of mana fluctuation starts with sensing the spells right when they affect the physical realm. Then you utilize Realmheart to accurately determine what form it will take. Even if your opponent chooses to vocalize their spell, what they are imagining is actually what will affect the size, shape, and duration of their spell. Even then, some mages might use a vocal projection as a feint to trick their opponent.”

I was able to make sense of her advice, but it was becoming harder to stay conscious as I lost more blood from the gaping wound that went through my clavicle. The asura continued debriefing the mistake I had made that led me to have this wound, all the while healing me by using aether. This wasn’t the first time something like this had happened—or even the seventh time for that matter—since starting my training. Through the numerous times I had failed in properly analyzing the flow of mana before it had materialized into a spell, I noticed that her healing through the use of aether was fundamentally different than that of my mother’s healing spells.

The limits my mother—along with any other healing mage—had were nonexistent to Myre. She was able to rid ailments, close gaping holes, even grow missing limbs, which had begged the question: why didn’t Myre simply cut off my legs and grow me a new one?

From what Myre had explained to me, it seemed like using aether past a certain threshold came with costs. It didn’t happen for all of the spells she did, or even most for that matter. However, the use of aether to grow a whole new limb meant that she had to extract the aether that was sustaining the life of something, or someone, else.

“I know what you’re thinking when you’re faced with the spells, child.” The asura’s voice startled me into focus. “Don’t get ahead of yourself and try to counter the spell before it manifests. It took me decades to get it right, and that was considered fast amongst us dragons. Now, shall we call it a night?”

Looking up at the sky, a thin layer of orange in the horizon was all that was left of the sun as night continued to take over.

“Sounds good,” I smiled, trailing behind into her small cottage.

It was surprising how the weeks had gone by unheeded thanks to the endless training and company from the elderly asura.

There was one thing that had become glaringly apparent over these past few weeks training with Myre, however: the docile and mild temperament that the asura had apparently feigned while she was nursing me back to health was all a lie. She made for pleasant company during any other occasion, but on the training grounds, her true personality became exposed, revealing a demonic entity that made even Kordri’s training seem like a puppy-petting session.

Worst of all, because of her expertise in healing through aether, there was little holding her back. She had a saying that she had repeated on numerous occasions that still haunted me in my dreams: “The best medicine for an injury is preventing one from happening in the first place. So if you don’t want me to injure you, prevent it.”

She would say that with the same sly smirk before hitting me with a colorful array of spells that I was forced to read and dodge using Realmheart.

It wasn’t only practical training, though. She had taught me what to look out for when a spell was about to manifest. Depending on the type of spell that would form, the mana particles would start fluctuating differently, so it was crucial to know what exactly you were looking at in the brief window. Needless to say, it was a lot like learning a new language—except your life depended on it.

It was frustrating at first, to the point where I even asked if it was possible for Windsom to let me use the aether orb to conserve time, but she spoke against it; something to do with the aether orb not allowing me to get an accurate grasp of how mana worked in the physical realm.

However, to Myre’s surprise, I was able to make leaps and bounds in regards to what I dubbed as mana interpretation. According to Myre, what took her half a year had taken me a bit shy of a month. I was nowhere near ready to use it in a real battle, but the fundamentals were there. Just like reading a book, I had the words down, but being able to speed-read would take months, maybe years.

These past six weeks, every morning would start off with mana analyzation as Myre shot out different spells of varying elements up in the air, and sometimes, directly at

me. Continuous use of Realmheart while training in this fashion had allowed me to somewhat increase the duration of this ability, but not by much.

In the afternoon, I would debrief on the mistakes that I had made and the nuances that I should watch out for to get a better prediction of what the spell might form into. Myre was meticulous in her explanations about why mana behaved the way it did, which helped the progress of my training.

After that, I would train by myself, going through the different forms that Kordri had instilled in me as I shadow-sparred. At night, before I went to sleep, I would always make sure to train my mana core, but after that last huge breakthrough I had made, there had been no drastic change in my core.

Just as the two of us had finished eating a simple stewed beef for dinner, a clear knock rang from the wooden door.

“Come in,” Myre called out as she took a careful sip from her mug.

“Excuse my intrusion,” the familiar voice responded as he opened the door.

It was Windsom.

I couldn't say I was happy to see him despite the fact that I hadn't had contact with the asura for months. The ever-so-poise asura with his platinum-blond hair cropped short and trim unexpectedly lowered himself to a knee, genuflecting with obvious respect towards Myre.

I had figured Myre had a certain level of influence within the Indrath Clan based on her powers and the fact that she was even able to keep me here despite the training I was supposed to be undergoing with Windsom. However, for him to be showing that much respect to the elderly asura sent some questions through my mind.

“I apologize for coming without notice, but Lord Indrath has already arranged for Arthur's next instructor, and he is waiting rather impatiently for his student.” Windsom's gaze lowered as he spoke.

“Very well, I do wish to keep tabs on the child, so there would be no problems if I popped in every now and then, right?” Myre's question came off as more of an irrefutable declaration by her tone.

“Of course not. Now, we must get going”—Windsom’s gaze turned to me, indicating for me to get ready—“So if you’ll excuse us.”

“You should go, Arthur. Remember to continue your training with Realmheart.” Myre ran her fingers through my hair that had grown long enough to be considered a mane.

“Of course. I’ll have it mastered by the next time we see each other,” I teased, exposing a childish grin.

Following Windsom out of the cottage, we made our way through a dense cluster of trees that surrounded Myre’s little hut.

While walking, I couldn’t help but notice Windsom’s gaze as he regarded me curiously.

“Is something wrong?” I asked, stepping over an exposed root.

“For Lady Myre to take the time to not only heal you but to train you as well...” His voice trailed off as he shook his head. “Your luck continues to amaze me.”

I ducked under a particularly low branch. “Who exactly is Myre, anyway?”

“Lady Myre,” Windsom stressed. “And I’m not in the position to tell you if she hasn’t told you herself.”

“You know, when I first met you, I figured you were pretty up there. Now, not so much,” I chuckled as we continued deeper into the forest.

“Watch your tongue, human. Even if I was the lowest of asura rank, I’d still be stronger than any of you lesser races in Dicathen,” Windsom retorted.

“My bad. I guess I struck a nerve?” I held my arm up in concession.

Exasperated, Windsom merely shook his head in silence. We soon reached the teleportation gate that Windsom had set up, glowing in radiating light as it reflected the destination it was set to.

“Remind me again why you set the gate so far from the cottage?” I asked, approaching the gate.

“Lady Myre’s protection field ends here,” he said simply as he dipped his right foot in

through the glowing circle. “Now come. Your instructor isn’t one for waiting.”

As Windsom’s body disappeared through the gate, I followed immediately after. Over the years, I had gotten used to the dizzying sensation of traveling through this method.

As I stepped out of the teleportation circle onto the sand-strewn ground, I couldn’t help but gaze in awe at the vastly different landscape we had traveled to. We were at the bottom of what appeared to be an enormous crater with imposing walls, carved by nature, towering over us on all sides. It looked like water once filled this giant hole at one point in time, but the only traces left now were the silver, ribbon-like fissures that lined the walls at varying heights. Plant life—life in general—seemed nonexistent as the harsh, arid air cut into my face. The uneven floor that spread across acres on end appeared to be constantly moving as the wind blew and spun debris in no particular rhythm or pattern.

“So my next training session is going to be here?” I confirmed, my voice quivering at the thought of spending weeks, or even months here. Because of the constant teleporting between my different training grounds, I couldn’t get a clear grasp of the continent of Epheotus; if I had come here under better circumstances, I would’ve wanted to explore the land of asuras.

“You’ve spent this past half-year training mostly in augmented melee combat. To put it simply, you’ve honed different skills in key aspects necessary to fight in a war. Now, you’ll start fitting everything together into a cohesive style that utilizes your elemental magic and your melee combat skills.” As the asura explained, he seemed to be searching for something as his eyes scanned over the distance.

“And this instructor will help me do this?” I surveyed around us as well.

“Ah, he’s here,” Windsom announced, ignoring my question.

“So this is him? He’s the pup that’s supposed to be the hero, leading Dicathen to victory against the Vritra-raised armies and their disgusting little Lessurans?” A deep, bass voice reverberated clearly from the top of the gorge.

The insect-sized figure standing on top of the crater’s edge, shadowed from the sun shining at his back, leaped up, growing larger as he descended like a meteor toward us.

Upon landing, an explosion of sand and debris made both Windsom and I shield

ourselves. As we waited for the dust cloud to clear, a large hand shot out from inside the cloud and lifted me off the ground. Even as I struggled using mana, the giant hand's grip around my waist refused to relent.

As I was pulled into the cloud of debris, a firm, deep voice resonated, shaking me to my very core. "Hello, Pup."

As the cloud dissipated, I was able to make out the source of the voice and the one I'd been trying to hopelessly free myself from.

Chapter 122

Wren Kain IV

In either of my lives, I'd never seen a beast like this before. The beast that had grabbed me seemed to be made entirely out of polished stone. Instead of eyes, two hollowed-out cavities radiating a pale glow that studied me with intelligence. With protruding mandibles that reminded me of an ape's, the beast let out a deep rumble, trembling the very organs inside my body.

By how far my feet were dangling off the ground, it was easily over five meters tall. However, despite the situation I was in, under this terrifying presence emitted by my captor, I couldn't help but stare in awe at what I beheld.

There was no flaw in the beast's stone hide. It was as if the very earth had painstakingly polished this monster for millions of years, etching away any of the flaws it once could've had. The glossy stone that made up the gigantic ape's body and face glittered like the ocean against the afternoon sun, enveloping it in an almost holy aura despite its grotesque form.

Suddenly, cracks began surfacing on the beast's body, splintering off into endless branches as the same pale light of its eyes surfaced from the thin fissures.

The giant hand that wrapped around me loosened before crumbling into fine sand, just like the rest of the beast's body. I fell to my feet as I watched the mound of sand, formerly the stone beast, slowly begin spreading onto the ground.

From the remains of the articulately conjured golem stood a thin, frail-looking man dressed in a shabby white coat. "From your expression, I'm guessing that didn't scare you—only surprised you at best," he muttered, clicking his tongue in annoyance.

"Arthur, I'd like you to meet Wren. He's going to be your instructor for quite a while, so get acquainted." Windsom had an amused sparkle in his eyes as he said this.

Out of all the asuras I had crossed paths with, Wren was by far the most unremarkable. With the body frame of a malnourished shut-in underneath his oversized coat, he stared at me intently, heavily hunched. The deep bags drooping beneath his half-

closed, tired eyes were almost as dark as the greasy black hair that fell over his face like wet seaweed, obviously left unwashed for days. That, coupled with the uneven stubble that spread across his chin and cheeks made for a man who would be looked down on by even the dirtiest of vagrants.

Still, I knew better than to judge a man, much less an asura, by his outward appearance. Hell, without a decent shower or haircut in months, I had no right to say anything.

Dipping my head, I formally introduced myself to my new instructor. "Nice to meet you, my name is Arthur Leywin. I'll be in your care."

"Windsom," the asura shifted his gaze, ignoring me. "What are the ramifications that the human society places on one who is tardy?"

"Excuse me? Ramifications?" I asked.

"A severed finger or toe, perhaps? No, that seems a bit severe. Imprisonment or social isolation seems more appropriate," the hunched asura muttered to himself as he rubbed his stubbled chin.

"What are you talking about? There aren't any ramifications or consequences for being a bit late!" I sputtered incredulously.

"What?" The asura looked genuinely surprised. "None at all? No punitive actions are taken whatsoever for such behavior?"

"It is looked down upon, but no, there are no formal charges one faces for being late," Windsom intervened.

"How odd. For races that have such a minuscule lifespan, I would've imagined you guys placed more importance on time more than anything else. Such a backward race, you humans," he murmured.

Despite his rude words, there was a truth to them. I couldn't help but stifle a laugh at the apparent irony of us "lesser races."

As the thin, shabby-looking asura continued to take mental notes, I couldn't help but shoot a questioning glance at Windsom.

“Regardless of my ignorance on the social intricacies of human conduct, we should move on to why you’re here. As well as why I’ve come to this god-forsaken crater at the tip of a mountain.” Waving his hand as if to discard his needless thoughts, the asura approached me.

“Arthur, was it?” my new instructor asked.

“Mhmm.”

“I want you to strip.” The asura’s gaze was unrelenting as he tapped his foot with impatience.

“Of course you do,” I muttered quietly under my breath.

“What was that?” He snapped.

“Not a single thing.” Letting out a sigh, I stripped down to my underwear. “Is this good enough, or would you like to study my family jewels as well?”

“The supposed savior of the lesser beings has quite the mouth,” Wren replied sardonically. He began circling me, poking me with his finger now and then. When the asura saw the white feather that Sylvia had left me wrapped around my arm, he removed it.

“Hey!” I exclaimed.

“Dragon’s feather. Truly a crafting material too rare to be wasting as an arm warmer, don’t you think?” the frail asura marveled.

“Crafting material?” I echoed, curious.

“The feathers on our wings are a particular type of scale that have many unique properties. From the day we are born, we never shed the feathers that make up our wings, so for a dragon to deliberately give someone his or her feathers signifies trust and affection,” Windsom answered.

Wren handed the long feather back to me. “I never knew,” I replied, looking at the long, white feather that felt silky between my fingers.

“How come Myre didn’t tell me about this?” I turned to Windsom.

“She must’ve had her reasons,” the asura answered in a dismissive tone.

Wren resumed his inspection, occasionally placing a finger or two over the major arteries and counting to himself.

“Spread your arms out,” Wren suddenly ordered. I did as told, hoping that abiding his commands would hasten the process.

I entertained myself with the amusing and slightly embarrassing fact that I was in the middle of a barren crater with two asuras watching me, almost completely naked.

The hunched asura continued to study me, muttering random numbers to himself. The afternoon sun cooked my skin as I continued to be examined like some laboratory mouse until Wren finally spoke again.

“We’ll start by firing a basic spell from all of the elements you can conjure. Use only your right hand to release the spell.” The asura placed his palm on my solar plexus and grabbed my right wrist. “Begin!”

I fired off a series of simple spells in no particular order: fire, water, ice, lightning, wind, then earth.

After I had finished, Wren began muttering to himself once again.

We continued testing with increasingly complex spells. Wren instructed the very form he wanted me to conjure the spell into, down to the very diameter of the stone pillar I was to erect from the ground.

Windsom quietly watched throughout the whole process, never uttering a single word unless asked. Whatever uncomfortableness or embarrassment I had during the beginning of this in-depth analysis was gone by the time the sun fell.

“Basic measurements and calculations are accounted for,” Wren announced, letting out a groan as he stretched his back and neck. “Moving on to effective use of mana arts in battle.”

Suddenly, he whipped around and pointed a long, pale finger at me. “Boy! Fire a spell over there. Quick!” The asura’s crackled voice rang as his finger shifted, pointing to a small, earthen golem that he had just conjured up.

On instinct, I turned to face the golem on command and gathered mana into my palm, manifesting it into a bolt of electricity that I fired at the target. The dummy golem shattered upon impact, crumbling into a small pile of rocks just about twenty meters away from where we were.

Without a change in expression, the pale-faced asura whipped his body in a different direction and pointed about thirty meters away, erecting another golem. "Again!"

I conjured another spell in my palm, but as I prepared to fire it, a heavy blow struck the back of my left leg, jerking me to my knee. The spell I had manifested in my palm shot out into the sky, missing the golem by a long shot.

Behind me was another golem that Wren had erected, standing with its arms crossed. Annoyingly enough, the golem had an arrogant grin etched into its faceless head.

Meanwhile, my instructor was staring at the bolt of fire that sailed across the sky, waving it goodbye.

"You missed!" he gasped in feigned surprise, his eyes remaining half-closed.

"So you're one of those guys," I cursed under my breath. I placed my palm on the golem, and with a few thoughts, it glowed bright red before crumbling into ashen remains. "Again," I echoed through gritted teeth, standing back up on my feet.

"A tough one," he whistled, taking out a small notebook and pen from his coat and scribbling something down.

From the very beginning, Wren had come off as an eccentric—reminding me a lot of Gideon—except I now knew that he was on a different level of weird than the old scientist back in Dicathen.

"Look, you've been making me do menial tasks all day. I'm fine with that, but I'd be more patient and willing if I actually knew what you were trying to figure out with your measurements and notes," I pointed out.

"I doubt you'd be able to comprehend what I tell you." Wren shook his head, waving dismissively at me.

"Try me," I challenged, still virtually naked.

He explained that he'd been making calculations and speculations based on the milliseconds it took for mana to move accordingly within my body before it manifested. Besides the condescending tone he had used throughout his explanation, his insights were brilliant.

"There's still a lot to account for that you didn't measure, though," I interjected. "We still need to account for the environment that we're in right now. I find myself most comfortable using fire and water elemental spells, but water-affinity mana is lacking in this area."

"Of course I put all of that into account. How long do you think I've been doing this for?" Wren's condescending gaze shifted, however, as he stared at me curiously. "How old did you say you were?"

"Nearly fifteen now," I answered, calculating in my head how long it had been since I came here.

"Huh. Not entirely brainless, I guess," Wren shrugged.

I'd known the asura for less than a day, and I already knew that this was as much of a compliment that I would ever get from him. "So what's next?"

"More tests. We'll continue with a long range mana manipulation analysis," Wren answered, looking around. The crater had turned dim, with only the moonlight shining above our heads.

Suddenly, the ground trembled underneath us. Out on the edge of the crater to our right were more golems. Even from here, I could make out hundreds of the human-sized stone golems approaching us.

The golems, much like the giant one that had first appeared, glittered in the dim moonlight as they marched in our direction.

I couldn't help but ask in awe, "How many golems can you conjure at a time?"

"Depends on the complexity of the golem but those guys, a few thousand or so. Now, go all out." Wren pointed his fingers at the golems, indicating for me to blow them up.

As the army of golems continued to draw closer, I activated Realmheart. I could feel my lips curl into a smile as the almost addictive feeling of my senses integrating with

the world's mana filled my body.

I unleashed everything I had in my arsenal, raining down an array of spells as Wren observed me scrutinizingly.

These golems were much sturdier than an average golem, but I managed to destroy the few hundred that Wren had conjured in less than an hour. I controlled my breathing as my chest continued to heave. I was tired, but destroying a few hundred golems did just the trick to relieve some of the stress I had.

"It's as you said, Windsom. What a peculiar child he is. To have Realmheart, as well as a decent control over the elements at his age... He makes an excellent test subject." For the first time, Wren's face contorted into something akin to a smile.

"What's next?" I asked, letting out a deep, content breath.

"Having fun, are we? It'll start being less fun once they start hitting back," Wren snickered. "Anyway, I still have to take into account the physical capabilities you possess. Windsom told me you're quite adept with a sword and you've recently learned combat under Kordri's instructions. So I'll be taking those facts into account as we begin our next phase."

"I understand, but for how long am I going to be naked?" I asked, looking at the pile of clothes that was now partially buried in debris.

"I'm analyzing every movement you make so it'd be better if you stay unclothed," he answered. "Don't worry. I'm not exactly filled with pleasure looking at your bare skin, either."

Letting out a faint smile, I responded, "Very comforting."

"Anyway. Let me take a look at the primary weapon you would use in a battle."

Windsom had passed on the dimension ring I always kept my sword in to Myre when she was taking care of me; she had given it back to me after I was healed. Taking out Dawn's Ballad from my ring—still inside its scabbard—I handed it to Wren.

I wasn't sure what I was expecting from the thin asura when handing the blade to him. But I wasn't expecting him to burst out laughing upon seeing my weapon.

The mysterious blade that I had stumbled upon looked like an ordinary black stick when it was still inside its sheath. Because of this, Wren might've mistaken it for a toy. "Here, let me show—"

"I know what it is, boy! Windsom, did you know of this when you asked me to train him?" Wren turned to the white-haired asura behind me.

"I had an inkling," he confessed.

Wren gripped Dawn's Ballad in both hands and began to tug on it.

"It's not going to unsheathe. Only I'm able to..." my voice trailed off as I watched, wide-eyed, at the sword being drawn effortlessly by the thin asura.

The sword that I had paired with was only supposed to open at my command. However, even I was only able to unsheathe it in the first place because of Sylvia's Dragon Will. "H-How?" I stuttered before coming to a realization. "Is it because you're an asura that you can draw the sword I've bonded with?"

"No," the asura answered, holding my sword up as he inspected its translucent teal blade. "It's because I made this sword."

Chapter 123

Battles In Various Scenarios

“Wait, you made this sword?” I echoed with obvious skepticism. Since coming across such a mysterious sword, I had often wondered who this W.K IV was. More than once had I scoured through the library of Xyrus Academy in hopes to find the smith with those initials, only to be met with disappointment and a dizzying amount of royal names.

“Was I speaking a different language?” Wren replied curtly, his eyes still inspecting Dawn’s Ballad.

Ignoring his quip, I changed my approach. “Okay, so assuming that you did forge this sword, what was it doing in Dicathen?”

Until now, I had assumed that my sword was of dwarven origin because of their specialty in this craft. A dark, bulky, bear of a man with a thick beard and bulging arms covered with hair and hands hardened with callouses had always come to mind when imagining the maker of Dawn’s Ballad; the typical stereotype associated with smiths and other metalworkers. Instead, this bony man that looked like he’d get tired holding a pen for too long stated that he had forged this sword.

“Dawn’s Ballad was one of my experimental weapons—more or less a failure. I tossed it away in the Beast Glades of your continent on one of my visits to gather minerals, assuming that no one would be able to even tell it was anything other than a black stick, much less open it. To think that it had somehow ended up in your possession... What are the odds?” The asura actually began to calculate the probability of this before I interrupted him.

“A failure? I’ve never seen a sword of better quality and make in my life. What makes it a failure?” I pressed.

“As much as a compliment your words may be, comparing my weapons—no matter how poor in quality—to the primitive tools used by you lesser races only insults me.” He clicked his tongue. “I had forged this sword as more of a one-size-fits-all weapon. I must’ve been drunk when I thought that was a good idea. This sword just came out to

be a sharp tool, nothing more, nothing less.” Wren finally pried his eyes off of the sword and exchanged glances at Windsom. “But this makes things interesting.”

Looking over my shoulder, I could see Windsom’s stoic face break into a smile as he replied, “I thought it might. So what do you think after meeting him? Will you do it?”

“What is going on?” I interrupted, lost. I began to grow afraid that the asura might claim back his weapon or even dispose of it completely for the sake of his pride. There was no doubt that I would never find a sword of this quality despite it being a “failure.”

“Arthur, I brought you here to Wren to accomplish two things. The first one, I had mentioned earlier. While his methods are unconventional, Wren has an usually keen eye in the practical theory of combat. The second reason was in hopes that Wren would produce a sword that is a better fit for your own unique form of combat.”

“Is that true?” I turned to Wren. “You’ll really forge a sword for me?”

“I don’t forge swords, brat. I create them. And I only came to train you because I owed a favor to Lord Indrath. His favor didn’t extend to wasting my time, making a sword for a lesser being.” Wren slid Dawn’s Ballad into its scabbard. “Anyways, I’m going to hold onto this sword for now.”

“For now? So you’ll give it back to me?” I confirmed, still apprehensive.

“Boy, Dawn’s Ballad might be just a sharp tool, but it still chose you. I’m not proud of this particular piece, but I’m not going to take it away from you,” he replied. The asura then stretched his arm in front of him and a sword suddenly emerged from the ground below. Grabbing the sword by its hilt, he tossed it to me. “For now, use this while training. I created it to measure the movements the user produces and the force of the impact it receives.”

“And you can just summon it from the ground at any time?” I asked, holding the seemingly normal shortsword in my hands.

“Out of everything I’ve done so far, you’re surprised by this?” Wren shook his head, motioning his hand at me. “Let me also hold onto the dragon feather.”

“What? Why this too?” I retreated, clasping my hand over my arm to cover the white feather.

“Do you find an innate urge to question everything I do?” the hunched asura snapped.

I reluctantly handed over the white feather over to Wren, scratching the scar I received after being bonded to Sylvie. Without the feather to cover it up, I felt bare, as if my skin had been removed.

Wren tucked the feather into his coat. “Now, I’m aware that you lesser beings need much more sleep than we do, so get some rest.”

“Wait, so we’re spending the night out here in the center of this barren crater?” I asked, looking around.

“Who said anything about we? Windsom and I have matters to attend to. And besides, there’s not always going to be a fluffy bed waiting for you during war, so I’m doing this for you.” The asura had a wicked smirk on his face as Windsom conjured a teleportation gate.

“Try to get some rest, Arthur,” Windsom advised just before stepping into the gate.

As the glowing runes making the teleportation circle faded, it grew eerily quiet. The occasional whistles of wind were the only sounds to be heard as I let out a sigh. Slipping my dusty clothes back on, I conjured up two slabs of earth to form a makeshift tent.

I must’ve knocked out as soon as laid my head against the pile of rocks I had gathered because a violent tremble caused me to smack my head against my stone pillow, jolting me awake in pain. I lowered the stone tent that I had created to be startled by the sight of countless golems encircled around my camp. Each of them wielded a different weapon but they all raised their weapons above their stone heads and swung down in unison.

My body acted on autopilot as I instinctively raised a dome of earth to protect me. With an explosive thud, the dome had crumbled and the debris fell on top of me. I was still dazed by the situation when Wren’s amplified voice resounded from above.

“You will never truly be at rest while you’re in the middle of a war, kid. You need to get used to fighting effectively in a suboptimal state. Now, strip your clothes and resume battle.”

“That damned lunatic,” I cursed. I could still hear the movements of the golems around

me, waiting for me to come back up.

Gathering mana around me, I waited for them to draw in as close as possible. Once their footsteps were in range, I released my spell.

[Gale Force]

Instead of aiming it at them, I released the spell on the ground below me, creating a large cloud of sand and debris to cover me. Some of the closer golems were shoved back by force, giving me enough space to maneuver around as the sand covered their vision of me.

I lunged myself at the nearest golem, raising my testing sword in one fluid swipe. I knew that Wren wanted to mimic the environment of war, so I acted as if the golems were actual humans. I slashed at the golem's jugular, and as expected, the golem fell on the floor, spewing a red liquid from its wound.

Another golem—this one wielding a large halberd—charged at me from behind. As it lowered its stance to thrust its weapon at me, I pivoted with my sword in position to parry the head of the halberd. However, even with a body strengthened with Sylvia's will on top of mana, I was thrown off balance at the force of the stab. I spun to alleviate some of the momentum caused by the blow, but I had no time to breathe as another golem shoved me with his iron shield.

Annoyed, I lashed out with a punch, my fist clad in lightning. The metal shield crumbled and the golem was shocked to the ground. Just then, the golem wielding the halberd swung his weapon at my head.

However, another golem, one of a different color, blocked my attacker with his shield.

"You'll have allies in battle, Arthur. As one of the main players in the battle, it'll be up to you whether you choose to be on the offensive—plowing through the lines of enemies—or staying near your team, keeping them alive." I saw Wren overhead, floating in the sky as he sat on an earthen throne along with Windsom.

The battle resumed as the pile of golem corpses stacked on top of one another on the battlefield. I imagined the anthropomorphic summons made of stone as humans instead. The scene back in the dungeon, Widow's Crypt, flashed to mind, leaving me a little nauseous.

As the hours drove on, the mock war that Wren had me endure began taking its toll. I understood more and more why gaining this experience was so crucial.

I had experienced wars only from the backline, strategizing for different scenarios on a macro level. Now, being in the middle of the battlefield, there were so many factors that differed from the usual duels that I had grown accustomed to since my previous life: the corpses and severed limbs that one could trip over, the blood that accumulated on the ground to form puddles that one could slip on. Even with the bright colors indicating the different sides the golems were on, it was easy to accidentally swing at an ally in the heat of a battle, creating a mental toll on reckless attacks that could potentially put allies in harm's way.

As much as I hated giving credit to the eccentric asura, Wren did well creating an optimal learning environment. I wasn't sure what sort of magic he had used, but the red liquid that the golems bled were very similar to that of blood. Soon, as the corpses of both enemy golems and ally golems increased and the blood-like liquid dyed the ground, a foul smell exuded the battlefield.

I realized how precious my mana reserves were as the hours of continuous battle dragged on. Even with my mana core at the mid-silver stage and my use of Mana Rotation, I had to know how to conserve my usage of magic. Flashy, long-range spells were better left to the conjurers in the back line as I spent my mana protecting myself and only in cases of emergency.

Throughout the battle, Wren shouted out pointers, advising me to avoid being herded into a corner as I continued to mow down enemy golems. Every now and then, golems that were stronger than usual would pop up, throwing me off guard as they massacred the golems on my side. I didn't want to admit it, but I was positive that Wren could easily conjure a golem capable of killing me if he wanted to.

The day ended when I was able to take down all of the major golems that Wren had been so kind to distinguish with golden crowns on top of their heads.

"That was brutal," I sighed, laying flat on the ground. I was in an almost constant state of battle from the moment I was rudely awakened, with no chance to eat, drink, or even pee.

Dinner was spent around a fire after Wren casually removed the golems and fake blood with a swipe of his hand. We began by debriefing the battle; Windsom had yet

to return from wherever he and Wren went last night, so it was only Wren that was present to point out the mistakes I had made, from the minor ones to the potentially fatal ones.

“The total number of casualties on your side was 271 golems, while the other side had 512. Not an impressive victory considering the level I had made the golems on the enemy side,” Wren read off from his notes.

“Maybe it’s because they look like stone gorillas that I feel no empathy for them, regardless of whether they’re on my team or not,” I countered, biting into a tofu-like substance that Wren had given me to eat.

“I’ll keep that in mind. Go to sleep now. Tomorrow isn’t going to get any easier,” Wren replied as he jotted down some notes.

I had grown used to Wren’s sharp way of talking, as if even his words were a scarce commodity. Turning away from them, I conjured a makeshift bed of soft sand and hoped that the next time I was awakened wouldn’t be by an army of golems.

My thoughts ran amok during this period of rest. I thought about my role in the previous world. While there were a lot of flaws in the way the world was governed in my past life, I had to admit, things were simpler for me. When the outcome of nearly all problems rested on just one battle, it was black or white. Wars almost never happened unless it was a multi-country dispute. Even then, mass-scaled battles happened in controlled environments to minimize the death counts. This upcoming war wouldn’t have that. There were too many shades of grays to be accounted for.

I speculated on the different scenarios that could potentially happen because of this war. What would the casualties be? And to what extent should the end outweigh these casualties? I pondered. I had no one I cared for back on Earth. However, was I willing to sacrifice my loved ones for the “greater good?” Undoubtedly not.

I didn’t remember falling asleep, but I hardly did these days. To my surprise, I was able to get a good night’s rest. While my arms and legs ached from overuse, there were no golems on sight, leaving me more suspicious than relieved.

Suddenly, a bloodcurdling scream from behind made me whip around. What I saw bewildered me just as much as it filled me with horror.

With two, black horns gleaming menacingly against the morning sun, an asura of the

Vritra Clan stood over me. Covered from the neck down in completely black-plated armor, the basilisk in human form opened his lips into a triumphant grin to reveal a row of jagged teeth, and in his grasp was someone I thought I would never see here.

I was barely able to form a word as another gut-wrenching scream was ripped out from the Vritra's hostage. "T-Tess?"

Chapter 124

Preparations

“Arthur! Please, help!” Tess choked out a desperate scream as I stood there, petrified at the turn of events. It really was Tessia Eralith. From her long, gunmetal-grey hair, to her turquoise eyes filled with tears, my childhood friend had somehow been dragged here from Dicathen.

Tess sputtered into a series of pained coughs as the basilisk tightened its grip around her waist.

Wasting no time, I charged at the black-horned asura with the practice sword Wren had left me. The repercussions of such a reckless course of action passed unheeded as I drew in, sword ablaze.

[Realmheart]

The familiar burning sensation spread through my body as I activated the rare blood-trait skill of the dragons. My sight altered into an enhanced, mana-focusing vision and golden-white runes glowed brightly beneath my clothes.

I drew forth the rampant energy from within Sylvia’s dragon will.

[Static Void]

This was the first time I had used the skill I had unlocked with the first phase of Sylvia’s will. I could see the purple specks of aether suddenly trembling around us as they buzzed into formation. Suddenly, the world stopped around me. The Vritra’s face was stuck in a menacing smirk while Tess was paused with her hair flailed about, mid-scream.

I could feel the seconds draining away my energy as I dashed towards the Vritra. Arriving right in front of my enemy, I released Static Void as soon as I was in position to strike at the hand grasping Tess.

The horned asura had no time to react at my attack as the blade of my sword sliced

right through its forearm.

The horned asura let out an infuriated roar as he clutched his wound. I pried open the fingers that were still gripped around Tess's waist and gently set her down on the ground. She was unconscious and ghastly pale, but still alive and breathing.

The basilisk's severed hand was still spilling blood profusely, but when I turned to face my foe, he had already replaced his severed appendage with a metallic claw.

I kept close to Tess with my right hand gripping my sword and my left hand preparing a spell. I could see the yellow, earthen particles gathering at the tip of the basilisk's false hand. I used the full extent of the limited knowledge I had gained from reading mana movement from Myre as I readied my counterattack as well.

As expected, the tips of the basilisk's clawed fingers exploded toward me. Just as the five earthen spears accelerated, I raised my hand and fired a condensed burst of electricity. Three of the five earthen finger spears shattered upon impact as I parried another spear with the flat of my blade. I began gathering mana into my legs to charge at the basilisk by impulse, but an unsettling sensation crept up; the last spear was way too off course to have been aimed at me.

I whipped my head back to see the dark, earthen spear about to impale the unconscious Tess when I activated Static Void once more.

It felt like someone was stabbing needles into my heart as I raced toward my childhood friend. My mind whirled in fear and near-panic as I laid out my options. I could step in the path of the spear and use my body to shield Tess, but the injury I would sustain from the blow would leave me unable to protect her from the basilisk immediately after. I could also extend Static Void to encompass Tess and push her out of the spear's path, but spreading the effects of Static Void to include another person would take a massive toll on my body.

I chose to go with the third option. Dropping my sword, I grabbed the spear that was paused mid-flight at Tess with both hands and braced myself.

Releasing Static Void, my body lurched forward as I tried to stop the earthen spike the size of Tessia herself with my bare hands. With a desperate spurt of strength, I managed to hold onto the speeding spike, my hands barely large enough to get a firm grip, long enough to drive it off-course.

The earthen spear that the basilisk fired buried itself from the ground just inches away from where Tess lay, creating a web of cracks from the sheer force of the impact. My hands were bloody and raw from gripping onto the speeding projectile, and my breath was pained and unsteady. Myre had been right. No matter how much I practiced Static Void, because my body wasn't compatible with using aether to effect time, it would always put an enormous amount of strain on my body.

However, with the level that I was at currently, I needed to use all of the tools I had in order to have a fighting chance with a basilisk. The thought of both Tess and I in the cruel state that a basilisk had left Alea, the former lance, down in the dungeon, filled me with dread.

Each breath felt like there was a fire in my lungs as I positioned myself between the approaching two-horned basilisk and the unconscious Tess. I picked up my sword with a grimace at the pain and poured mana into it. Despite the strain my body had incurred from activating Realmheart and using Static Void twice, my mana reserves were still abundant thanks to the constant use of Mana Rotation.

I could maybe last long enough for either Wren or Windsom to arrive, but the problem was that for whatever reason, this basilisk was focused on harming Tess. I was contemplating my next course of action when it all clicked.

"Wren, enough of this!" I roared, stabbing my sword into the ground.

Nothing happened at first and, for a split second, I was afraid I had been wrong, but the towering basilisk stopped abruptly in his tracks before crumbling into fine dust.

Behind me was another mound of fine sand where the golem in the shape of Tess had been.

"You caught on rather quick. I was hoping to see how you played out the situation a bit more." Wren emerged from the rocky ground, dusting off his shabby white coat.

"It's hard not to catch on with such an absurd scenario, Wren. I hope you don't get a kick out of doing things like this," I retorted, disgruntled.

"How does one receive a kick from training? Improper teaching methods, perhaps? Is it a disciplinary action you lesser beings do to one another?"

"No, it's an idiom—nevermind," I sighed, shaking my head at the confused asura.

“Regardless of your illogical expression, what I did was for your benefit. Look at the state you’re in now; you’ve expended most of your energy on recklessly attempting to save that elf,” Wren grunted.

“Look. I know it wasn’t the best course of action, and I hate to say it, but there are people that I consider more important than anyone else, including myself.” I held my gaze firmly as Wren continued to study me.

“Hmm. Well, familial bonds and mates are important, even for asu—”

“Wait, what? Mate? Tess isn’t a mate.”

“Oh? From what Windsom told me and by your reaction, I was sure that her importance went above that of just infatuation. You two haven’t yet engaged in carnal intimacy?”

“No! I haven’t engaged in... carnal intimacy yet! Look, this is beside the point, Wren.” I could feel my face beginning to burn as the asura pondered his miscalculation.

“Huh. My apologies then.” Wren shrugged, his expression as apathetic as before. “Well, my point is that, in war, there will come a time when your enemies will try and exploit whatever weaknesses you hold. Considering that you will be one of the main powers on Dicathen’s side, all the more so.”

“Trust me; I know that.” Flashes of my previous life came to mind at this subject. I knew that there would be a point in time when the values of this life, the ones that went against my principles as King Grey, would come to hinder me.

“Then I suppose it’d be pointless for me to go on. Expect more training and tribulations like these, boy. Part of why I was tasked to nurture you out of your diapers is because I can single-handedly create all sorts of scenarios,” the hunched asura explained as he idly fiddled with his unruly hair.

Having lived two different lives, I wanted to refute his statement about me being in diapers, but I remembered that even with the combined span of time I’d been alive for—in both worlds—I’d still be much younger than any of the asuras I had met so far.

Taking a deep breath, I sat down on the ground. “So you can just create a dummy of anything using the earth?”

“Not anything. I wouldn’t be able to mimic the properties of water using earth, but mostly, yes,” the asura answered, sitting down on an extravagantly golden throne he conjured without even a snap of a finger.

I thought back to when I had faced the fake basilisk. Every detail of both the black-horned asura and Tess had been spot on. However, there were two things that gave it away. One was that the golem of the basilisk couldn’t emit the amount of pressure and killing intent it normally would. However, that wasn’t what threw me off. Besides the probability of a basilisk holding Tess all the way here in Epheotus being almost nonexistent, under the influence of Realmheart, I was able to see the mana fluctuation of yellow earthen particles all over the basilisk and Tess. I couldn’t figure it out at first because I failed to stay levelheaded, but as I realized what was happening, I was about ninety-percent sure.

“Is it impossible for lesser beings to reach such a level of insight to perform the level of mana arts asuras are capable of?” I wondered aloud.

“It goes against my nature to rule anything as impossible, so I’m just going to say that it is highly improbable. You of all people shouldn’t be so worried about probabilities though.”

“Why is that?” I asked.

“Well, the fact that you’re a walking testament to how skewed probabilities can be. With your innate ability to comprehend the workings of the four main elements as well as some of their deviating elemental forms coinciding so neatly with the fact that comprehension of all four elements is necessary to unlock the mysteries of aether that you’ve been so kindly bestowed by the very princess of dragons, every bit about you is an outlier, boy,” Wren explained. “Even asuras don’t have that much innate talent and luck.”

“If that’s your way of cheering me up, thank you,” I chuckled, getting back up to my feet. “Now, what’s next on our to-do list?”

“Before that, boy, give me your dominant hand.” Wren got up from his makeshift throne and walked towards me.

Spreading my right hand with my palm facing up, I stared at the asura curiously. I could never read his face since he always had the same tired expression, like he’d drop to

the floor snoring at any moment.

Taking out a small, black case the size of a fist from his coat pocket, he opened it and held out a small, pyramid-shaped, opaque gem. “This is a mineral called an acclorite. Now, by itself, it’s a rather rare but useless piece of rock. However, with the right refining and synthesizing process that I will keep to my grave, it is capable of doing something remarkable.”

“As in, speeding up the training process of the user?” I guessed.

“Remember when I said I don’t forge swords, but create them?” the hunched asura asked, still holding out the tiny gem in front of me.

I nodded in reply.

“Well, with the use of this small little gem and the right tools, I can essentially grow a weapon.”

“Grow? As in, grow like a tree?” I reiterated, sure that I had heard wrong.

“Yes,” the asura sighed, scratching his head. “I swear, you get surprised by the most odd things. You hardly bat an eye at the fact that I can conjure a near perfect replica of your mate—”

“Not my mate,” I cut off.

Rolling his eyes, he continued, “Yes, your elf lover that you have yet to copulate with, but you get shocked by the fact that I can grow a weapon?”

Letting out a defeated breath, I motion for him to continue.

“Normally, I would use the feedback from years, decades even, worth of constant observation of how you fight, in order to get the proper information to create a weapon that perfectly suits you, but because of the circumstances surrounding you, I’m going for a bit of a gamble by doing this,” Wren clarified.

“What do you me—” A sudden, sharp pain cut me off as the asura suddenly stabbed the gem into the center of my palm.

“Gah! What are you doing?” I winced as Wren continued burying the opaque gem

deeper into my flesh until it was completely submerged under my skin.

“Oh I’m sorry, I forgot to count to three,” he jibed, rubbing my blood that’d gotten on his finger on my shirt. “I synthesized the acclorite with a portion of Lady Sylvia’s feather as well as a scale from Lady Sylvie. These are both indispensable parts of what make you who you are. By doing this, I’m going to hope that some of the unpredictabilities will be accounted for.”

“What would be so unpredictable?” I asked as I studied the small hole in my palm where the gem was buried.

“Every movement, action, thought, and change in your body will all factor into how your weapon will manifest. Even I have no idea how your weapon will turn out,” the asura confessed. “If it even comes out as a weapon.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m not quite following along, Wren. Why do it this way if the outcome is uncertain? And besides, I thought you weren’t going to make me a weapon?”

“Well, you’re going to need more than just a sharp stick to get by in the future if you’re going to be facing those ingenious basilisks from the Vritra Clan and whatever spawn they conjure up,” he grumbled.

The asura’s face turned solemn before continuing. “And it’s because we don’t have that much time.”

“Wait, I thought that I would have about two years left before the war starts?” I stared at Wren as an uneasy feeling crept up from the pit of my stomach.

There was a hesitant pause from Wren as he deliberated on what to say next.

“Kid, Windsom just received word from Aldir about the most recent news of Dicathen.”

“And?”

“Before I say anything else, Know that I’m telling you this against Windsom and Lord Indrath’s wishes. I want you to make the logical decision. With the help of the aether orb in some portions of the training, it’ll still take about a year before the acclorite manifests itself into a weapon. You’ll also need that much time to strengthen yourself for the war.” Wren’s face creased with something akin to worry as he explained.

“Just tell me,” I pressed.

“Arthur, although the full army has yet to arrive... the war has already started.”

Chapter 125

The Calm of War (1)

TESSIA ERALITH'S POV:

"I can fight, Grandpa!" I yelled, slamming my palms on the table.

"And I'm telling you that you can't," he snapped back as his eyes stayed glued to the document he was reading, refusing to meet my gaze.

"Enough, Tessia. Your grandfather is right. The risk of putting you out on the field is much too high and unnecessary right now," Master Aldir's commanding voice cut in.

"But, Master! Even you said yourself that I'm much stronger than I was before!" I argued, ignoring my grandfather.

"And that is still not enough." The one-eyed asura's tone was matter-of-fact.

I could feel my face burning hot as I did all I could from keeping my tears at bay. Refusing to let them see me cry, I stormed out of the study as Grandpa called out for me.

I marched down the long, narrow hallway lit by widely-spaced torches that flickered brightly against the cobblestone wall. I banked a left near the end of the hallway, reaching two, solid-iron doors guarded on either side by an armored augments and a well-dressed conjurer.

"Princess? What brings you here?" the conjurer called out, her voice laced with concern.

"Please open the doors," I ordered, my eyes focused on the center of the entrance. Despite my sour mood, I couldn't help but stare in awe at the unique doors that guarded this castle. I remembered that when it was first completed by Professor Gideon, even Master Aldir had been pleased by the craftsmanship.

"I-I'm sorry, we haven't received any notice from Commander Virion or Lord Aldir that

anyone would be leaving,” the armored augments mutters as he trades uncertain glances with his companion.

“Open the doors, she’s supposed to run an errand with me,” a familiar voice echoed from behind.

“General Varay!” Both guards saluted in unison before lowering themselves into a respectful bow.

Turning around, I let out a relieved smile at the lance, who had become more like an older sister to me these past two years.

The elegant, yet intimidating lance approached me with a steady and purposeful gait, her tight-fitting navy coat trailing gracefully behind her. Varay’s left hand rested on the pommel of the thin sword strapped to her waist as she nodded at me with her usual aloof expression.

The two guards immediately went to work opening the double doors. The conjurer mumbled a long incantation as the augments went to work pulling the various knobs and levers all over the intricate doors.

“Thank you, Varay.” I hugged her arm as we headed inside the room.

Once inside, the iron double doors closed behind us with a loud thud. While the room was heavily secured with a unique mechanism on the door that required a complex pattern of spells and precise movement of locks to open, the area it was guarding wasn’t nearly as noteworthy. The small, rather musty cylinder room was all but empty except for a single teleportation gate and a gateman in charge of controlling the gate’s destination.

The elderly gateman stood up straight at our sight, dropping the book he had been reading to pass the time. “General Varay, Princess Tessia, what can I do for you?”

Varay looked over her shoulder, waiting for me to speak.

“Etistin City, please,” I responded.

“Certainly!” The gateman went to work, mumbling over the ancient runes that allowed such complex magic.

The gate, a stone platform with a complicated sigil that marked the center of it, began glowing different colors before it focused on its directed location.

“All ready. Please take this emblem for identification when you use the gate at Etistin. This will be the only way the gateman over there will let you return to the castle,” the elderly gateman said as he handed the two of us a small metal locket with the three-race insignia on it.

“Surely they’d know who we are, right?” I asked as I tucked the locket in the inner pocket of my fitted robe.

The gateman shook his head. “Security has tightened throughout the continent because outside attacks have become more frequent. Even though Etistin is still quite a distance away from the Beast Glades, Commander Virion has employed stricter measures just in case.”

“I see.” I let out a sigh as I stepped up to the platform where the teleportation gate stood. “Are you sure you want to come with me to babysit me, Varay?”

“I just finished my lessons with Princess Kathlyn so a little break for me is fine,” she answered back curtly, stepping up behind me.

Our surroundings distorted as soon as we stepped into the gate, my vision being filled with a blurry montage of luminescent colors.

We arrived in seconds to the city that was once the humans’ capital in the country of Sapin. I remembered from school that the city was built on the western coast of the continent back then to be out of reach from the dwarven and elven countries as well as to keep as far away from the Beast Glades as possible.

However, almost years ago, after the war was announced, King Glayder basically tore down the city, as well as all the neighboring ones, and had it built back up as armored forts; this was in anticipation of the army of Alacrya most likely coming toward this side.

“Princess Tessia and General Varay!” the two gatemen exclaimed in surprise as they both gave a deep bow.

“We’re not here on official business. Please, relax,” I coaxed, smiling at the guards who all had concerned expressions. We left the secured room where the the gate was

placed, stepping out into the busy streets. The both of us hid our faces underneath our woolen hoods to keep from attracting needless attention.

Outside, the streets were filled with a panorama of bustle and noise. Merchants wheeled their carts through the wide street as the vendors and entertainers that had set up small tents and canopies on either side of the large, main road were haggling with the housewives. Ever since Etistin was demolished and rebuilt as a military city, the economy relied on the soldiers and their families that were stationed here. Smiths and other craftsmen travelled here knowing that their work would be in high demand. Merchants soon went out of their way to set up shops here because of the ever-growing population that derived from how many soldiers were stationed.

Just walking down the street, you could see the soldiers, whether they were burly augmenters or lean conjurers, marching with weapons in hand. They all wore the same moss-green and silver uniform with the Triunion emblem that had become the official symbol of Dicathen.

“Was there anything specific you wanted to do?” Varay asked as she slowed her pace to match mine.

“Not particularly.” I shook my head. “I just wanted some fresh air and to be away from everyone in the castle.”

“Keep your sword out and ready at all times, Tessia,” Varay said, pointing to my empty waist.

Letting out a sigh, I replied, “I’m here with you, right? And besides, this city is like the farthest point from all of the fighting.”

Etistin was rebuilt to be the very last line of defense against the Alacryan army seeing as its location was farthest away from the battle and in an ideal location with most of its sides facing the ocean.

Our main forces had actually been sent out into the Beast Glades to explore dungeons because that was where the Alacryan forces had been popping out from. From what Grandpa Virion had deduced from their investigations, the unnatural occurrences that had happened over the past ten years, including the death of one of our lances, Alea, were for the purpose of setting up hidden teleportation gates in the depths of the dungeons. It would be hard for them to instantly teleport an army, but with enough

time and enough individual teleportation gates, the Alacryan forces could muster up enough soldiers and mages to do considerable damage if they didn't prepare beforehand.

After this news came to light, Master Aldir and my grandfather had to strategize on the defenses around the Beast Glades.

"In times of war, it's necessary to always be ready for the worst case," Varay replied.

I didn't want to argue any further so I took out my sword from my dimension ring and strapped it to my waist underneath my wool cloak. "Happy?"

She nodded. "Satisfied."

"So how is Kathlyn and Curtis doing with their training?" I asked quietly, stopping by a stall that had a particularly beautiful set of handcrafted jewelries.

"Bairon tells me Curtis is determined and hardworking, but that their progress is slow. He has definitely made progress but even as a beast tamer, his comprehension of mana is only average at best. Princess Kathlyn, on the other hand, is moving along well in her training. I was told she was always a bit more gifted than everyone else, and from these two years, I understand why," Varay answered, looking apathetically at the jewels she had no fondness for.

"Well not more than everyone else," I corrected when a dull ache gripped at my heart.

"You're right. I forget at times that the boy is your guys' age. Arthur is an anomaly of a whole different level, no doubt." Varay nodded at herself. "I can only imagine what level he will be at when he comes back after training with the asuras."

Even through her expressionless face, it was easy to tell that Varay was a bit envious of Arthur. After all, training with the asuras on a higher level than even Master Aldir was something that someone could only wish for in their dreams.

However, I knew firsthand how harsh the asuras were just from the dozen or so lessons I had received from Aldir over these past two years. Imagining myself under constant supervision by Master Aldir sent shivers down my spine.

As we continued walking down the main road, I admired the imposing outer walls that surrounded the whole city. I could barely see the small figures of guards patrolling on

top of the wall from where I was standing. The city had been rebuilt so that the buildings build on the center of the city were the highest. The buildings and homes surrounding it all lowered the farther out someone went so that conjurers and long range augmenters could easily go on top of any of the buildings and have a clear shot at their enemies without fear of obstruction. Of course, this was only if the enemies were able to break in through the thick, mana-enforced walls that surrounded Etistin.

“Do you think the Alacryan army will be able to make it all the way here?” I asked, still staring at the outer walls. “I heard from Grandpa that Director Cynthia said Alacrya is to the west of Dicathen. Doesn’t that mean this place is closest to our enemy?”

“Yes, but she also said that they had no effective way of transporting significant amounts of soldiers across the ocean, which is why they’re going for a more discreet method of coming through teleportation gates that they had set up all over the Beast Glades,” she answered as she veered off to look at some of the weapons on display at a nearby forge.

“I see,” I mumbled. I felt bad for Director Cynthia, who had been confined for these two years. While Master Aldir was able to break enough of the curse that had bound her from releasing any information about her homeland so that she could divulge some intelligence, Director Cynthia still ended up in a comatose state. At the expense of her consciousness, the woman who was once in charge of Xyrus Academy was able to tell us some critical information regarding her homeland. Now, she was simply lying, barely alive, in a room constantly taken care of by a nurse.

Much of the business regarding the war had caused a strain in my relationship with my grandfather. While he had always looked scary, Grandpa had always been the nice, embarrassing man who just wanted what was best for me. After he had taken on the role of commanding the militant forces with Master Aldir, who operated only in the shadows, his personality became darker and more strict.

I hated that it had to happen, but I didn’t blame Grandpa; at least I was able to see him more often than my mom and dad. My parents and Kathlyn’s parents were working the social front, doing everything they could to further strengthen and implement action from the cities. With the King and Queen Greysunders both killed, the dwarves were in rebellion, so our parents were working to, once again, gain their allegiance.

“Watch out!” someone suddenly yelled as he ran headfirst into me.

With my thoughts totally occupied elsewhere, my body ran on instinct as I grabbed his wrist while I pivoted my body. Placing my foot in front of his, the person tripped and I had him pinned down with my sword half-unsheathed, pressed against his throat, when I saw the person's face.

"Emily?" I sputtered, alarmed.

Chapter 126

The Calm of War (2)

“P-Princess?” she exclaimed, even more surprised than I was.

I quickly sheathed my sword and released my friend. Emily Watsken had been the only girl my age besides Kathlyn that I had spent any considerable amount of time with. Her master, Gideon, came in and out of the castle when he wasn’t engrossed in new gadgets and inventions that he believed could help out in the war.

“I’m so sorry, Emily. You just came kind of out of nowhere and my body reacted on its own,” I apologized, helping her gather the tools and books she had been carrying before I flipped her so gracefully on the ground.

“No, I should be more careful, haha! I was carrying way too many things and my glasses slipped so I couldn’t really make out where I was going. Besides, that was kinda fun. You know, in an abrupt and slightly brain-rattling sort of way,” Emily assured, her voice a bit shaky. Noticing the dark-haired lance next to me, she stiffened before bowing. “Hello, General Varay.”

“Greetings, Miss Watsken,” Varay nodded as she remained upright with no intention to help.

Emily tied back her thick, curly hair that had exploded out of its ponytail state because of me. As I stacked the items on Emily’s arms, I couldn’t help but notice the worn out pieces of paper filled with scribbles that had fallen out of her tattered notebook.

“What are you and Professor Gideon working on nowadays, anyway? I haven’t seen you at the castle in a while,” I took on some of Emily’s load once the stack of books had started reaching her face.

“Ugh, don’t call him Professor. My nutjob of a master can hardly be considered sane, let alone an educator of the future generations,” Emily huffed, letting out a tired sigh.

“Well, he was still a professor at Xyrus for a point in time before all of this happened,” I pointed out as I walked alongside her.

“Yeah, so you know as well as I do how many students were taken to the infirmary because of all the explosions and fires he’s caused in that limited ‘point in time,’” Emily muttered as she used the stack of books she was holding to push her glasses back up.

“You’ve had it rough, haven’t you?” I chuckled, bumping her gently with my shoulder.

“I swear, I think I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve had to dig up my master from a pile of debris and useless junk after an explosion he’d caused. Anyways, I was getting these observation notes that a team of adventurers had written back to Master Gideon. Do you want to come along?”

“Can I?” I asked, turning my head to Varay for consent. Giving me a curt nod in response, I agreed to follow along.

“How have you been these days anyway, Princess?” Emily asked as we weaved our way through the main road.

“Drop it with the ‘Princess,’ Emily; you know I hate that,” I scolded. “And I’ve been terrible. You have no idea how suffocating it is inside the castle.”

“Oh sure. The halls are pretty narrow and the ceilings are much too low for a castle,” she agreed, clumsily sidestepping a passerby.

“Ha, ha. You think you’re so clever.” I rolled my eyes.

“Hey, I’m a delight!” she puffed proudly. “Besides, try being stuck with someone like Master for hours a day and see what that does to your sense of humor.”

“Oh, woe is you! You’re a real damsel in need of a better social outlet.” I stuck my tongue out at her. Emily did the same as we eventually broke out into a fit of giggles.

“I’m serious, though. You have no idea what it’s like being stuck in a castle with an asura and an overbearing grandfather that can make taking a breath of air seem like a dangerous activity.”

“Ew, sounds suffocating.” Emily’s face cringed.

“Tell me about it,” I sighed.

“But don’t be so rough with your grandfath—I mean, Commander Virion,” she

amended, casting a quick glance back at Varay. "After how you were kidnapped and almost killed, I can only imagine how he and your parents must've felt..."

"I know. I try not to be, but when he has me caged up like a bird, I can't help it. Training has been the only way for me to let out my stress, but with more and more sightings and attacks from the Alacryan forces coming out of the Beast Glades, no one has the time to train with me."

Emily puffed out her cheeks, trying to think of a response. We eventually took a turn into a less crowded street, Varay sticking close behind us like a shadow in case anything were to happen.

"Oh yeah, any news about Arthur?" Emily asked.

"You mean besides the same old news that Master Aldir repeats like a neurotic mimic bird?" I shook my head.

"He is training. That is all you need to know," Emily recited in a deep voice exactly the same way she had when I told her the last time.

"Yup!" I giggled.

There was another gap of silence in our conversation when Emily asked in a hushed whisper. "What about Elijah?"

A sharp pang ran through my chest at the mention of that name, not because I was sad, but because I could imagine how guilty Arthur must be feeling.

"No news. Honestly, I have no idea why Elijah was taken to Alacrya alive," I confessed, clutching tightly onto the books.

It was my fault in a way that this happened to Elijah. I barely knew the guy aside from the fact that he was Arthur's closest friend. From what others that witnessed the scene had described, it seemed like he'd tried to save me before he was taken.

It was obvious that Elijah had tried to save me for his best friend; for all we knew, he could've been tortured for information or taken hostage to lure Arthur or maybe just even killed. I knew some of these possibilities were a bit of a stretch, but it scared me to think that this happened to him because of me.

What's worse was that, more than feeling sorry for Elijah, I felt like I was more scared that Arthur would hate me because of this—because of what happened to his best friend. I thought I was strong; ever since I had received the elderwood guardian will from Arthur, I felt invincible—even when I couldn't fully control it. How foolishly naive I was. I should've listened to Arthur when he told me he'd come with me to school. I should've been more ready.

These were the thoughts that made my nights often sleepless, but they were also the thoughts that drove me to train harder. Train so I would be strong... train so that I wouldn't be a liability to anyone.

“—ssia? Tessia?” Varay's voice jolted me out of my thoughts.

“Yeah?” I looked up to be suddenly face-to-face with the lance.

“You okay?” Emily asked from my side, her voice laced with concern.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, of course I am. Why do you ask?” I muttered as Varay wordlessly placed a hand on my forehead.

“Not sick,” she said simply before giving me some space.

“You kind of seemed dazed,” she said as we approached a large, square building. “Anyways, we're here.”

As we approached Professor Gideon's and Emily's workplace, I couldn't help but marvel at the structure. It wasn't impressive in the traditional sort of way but it really was a sight to see. The square structure was only one story high, but in order to go through the front entrance, you needed to go down a flight of stairs, indicating that there was at least one level underground.

With thick and imposing walls, it seemed more like a shelter civilians would go to in case of a disaster than a research facility.

“Come on. These books are getting heavier by the minute,” Emily called out from ahead.

The three of us went down the stairs and through a metal door similar to the one that guarded the teleportation gate inside the flying castle.

Emily set her things on the ground and placed both palms at different locations on the door. I couldn't hear what she was mumbling, but soon, streams of light glowed brightly from where her hands had been placed and the single door unhinged with a loud click.

Going inside, my senses were overwhelmed. There was a frenzy of movement from workers and artificers as sounds of metals clanging against one another echoed along the building. The large building was one gigantic space, separated only by moveable partitions dividing different projects that were simultaneously going on. Throughout all of this, I couldn't help but keep my nose pinched at the indescribably pungent smell.

"What is this stench?" I asked, my voice coming out nasally.

"What isn't this stench!" Emily shook her head. "So many different minerals and materials are being either melted or refined that it's hard to discern the smells apart."

Even Varay cringed as we went further down the stairs.

"Damn it, Amil! How many times do I have to drill into that thick skull of yours that you can't keep those two minerals in the same container! They'll draw each other's properties out, and I'll be left with two useless hunks of rock!" a voice exploded all the way from the back corner of the building.

"Ah, there's my lovely master's voice," Emily sighed as she motioned for us to follow.

As we made our way to the source of the harsh voice, we bumped into the man who I could only assume was Amil by his shaken expression and the fact that he was holding a box full of rocks.

"E-Excuse me," he croaked, his voice cracking. "Oh, h-hello Emily. Tread carefully around Master Gideon; he's a bit on edge today."

The poor man gave us all a quick bow, barely even looking at us as he hurriedly ran off to fix his mistake.

Continuing our little tour of Emily's workplace, an elderly gentleman that had been talking with a group of several men in the traditional brown robes that most artificers wore turned around as he heard us approaching. His eyes lit up as he made his way toward us after dismissing the group of men.

Judging by his wardrobe, I would've normally assumed he was just a butler, but something about the way he carried himself and the respect the men back there showed him told me it wasn't that simple.

"Good afternoon, Princess, General, and Miss Emily. I'm glad you came back so quickly, Master Gideon is waiting for you." The gentleman dipped his head in a little bow and led the way after taking the items that Emily and I had been carrying.

"Thanks, Himes. Is Master in one of his moods again?" Emily asked, following closely behind the butler.

"I'm afraid so, Miss Emily. I'm sure he's only agitated waiting for these," he answered, holding up the pile of leather-bound notebooks.

We made our way through the maze of partitions until we arrived at a particularly closed off space enclosed in the corner by rather high partitions. As soon as we entered through the tiny opening between the dividers, we were met by Professor Gideon, who practically pounced at the notebooks Himes was carrying. The genius artificer and inventor looked the same as he always had, with the same, lightning-struck hair, beady eyes, and brows that seemed permanently furrowed together. The wrinkles on his forehead did seem to be even deeper than before, just like how his dark circles somehow continued to grow darker.

"It's nice to see you too, Master," Emily mumbled. She turned to me and Varay, giving us a shrug.

At first, I wanted to explore the facility, but as Professor Gideon progressed through the stack of notebooks with breakneck speed—practically tearing apart the pages as he flipped through them—my curiosity drove me to stay and wait. It seemed like Emily and Varay both had the same thoughts I did, because they were both staring intently at Professor Gideon as well.

Suddenly, after going through about six notebooks, he stopped on a particular page.

"Shit!" Professor Gideon slammed his hands on his desk before scratching furiously at his unruly hair.

We stayed silent, not knowing how to respond. Even Emily stared wordlessly, waiting for her master to say something.

“General, can you make a trip with me?” Professor Gideon’s eyes stayed glued to the notebook as he asked this.

“I’m currently with the Princess,” she answered simply.

“Bring her along too. Emily, you come as well,” Gideon responded as he gathered the pile of notebooks and scattered pieces of paper on his desk.

“Wait, Master. Where are we going?”

“The eastern coast, on the northern border of the Beast Glades,” the inventor answered curtly.

“Commander Virion has prohibited Princess Tessia from venturing out. Having her come—”

“Then leave her here. I just need you or another general to come with me in case anything happens, which will be unlikely,” he cut her off as he continued gathering his things. “We just need to leave as soon as possible. Emily, bring me my usual inspection kit.”

Emily scurried out of her master’s makeshift office. Varay took out a communication artifact from her dimension ring when I quickly grasped her hand.

“Varay, I want to go,” I said, squeezing the lance’s hand.

Varay shook her head. “No, your grandfather would never allow it. It’s too dangerous.”

“But Aya is out on a mission, and Bairon is still busy training Curtis. Please—you heard Professor Gideon, he said nothing’s going to happen,” I insisted. “Besides, Professor Gideon seems to be in a hurry!”

“Damn right I am, now let’s go. There’s just something I need to confirm with my own eyes. We’ll be back before the day is over,” Professor Gideon reassured as he put on a coat.

I could see the lance hesitating so I drove in one last nail. “Varay, you’ve seen me train for the last two years. You know how strong I’ve become,” I said, my gaze relentless.

After a moment of deliberation, Varay let out a sigh. “Then you must obey my every

command while we are on this trip. You fail to do that and this will be the last time I help you get out of the castle.”

I nodded furiously, eager to explore a part of the continent I had never gone to before, regardless of how short the trip would be. As soon as Emily arrived with a large black bag in tow, we set out.

Chapter 127

Washed Up Omen

The only stop we made was at the stable to pick out a few horses for our trip after going through the teleportation gate. We needed to go a bit out of the way to find horses accustomed to going through teleportation gates, which caused Professor Gideon to fidget with impatience.

The man was a nervous wreck throughout the trip. He said very little after going through the teleportation gate, only snapping at the reigns of his black steed to go faster. Soon, we arrived at a rather thin trail with the Forest of Elshire to our left. I could see the thin fog spilling over onto our trail, making the road look kind of creepy. To our right, there was a thin stream that acted as a fence, marking the border of the Elshire Forest and the edge of the Beast Glades.

Emily sat behind Himes on a white stallion as I rode with Varay on a particularly gentle brown horse, leaving us with little else to do but talk. However, we rode in silence most of the trip; it was hard to talk over the sound of our horses' hoofbeats clicking on the ground.

Eventually, the familiar, briny smell of the ocean filled the air. I could almost taste the salt on my tongue from the growing breezes that whipped against my face. While the weather was cool, it was obvious that it was growing much more humid, fast. My shirt began sticking to my skin, leaving me uncomfortable and grimy.

"We're almost here!" Professor Gideon yelled over the howl of the wind. Soon, the trees that made up the dense, magical forest began spreading apart, and eventually clearing up to a wide plain of wild grass and shrubs.

The ocean came into view, quickly widening from the horizon as we drew closer to the edge of the shore. The strength and speed of the winds grew stronger the closer we got to our destination, soon drowning out the sound of our horses' gallop. Large rocks began popping up more and more on the field of grass that sandwiched us on both sides until we had stopped our horses on the edge of a rocky ledge that overlooked the shore.

I had to shield my face with the hood of my cloak against the sharp, sand-filled winds that cut against my body. I was about to ask if we had arrived when I spotted something unnatural on the coast.

It was a humongous boat, or rather, what was left of it. As the waves lapped against its metal exterior, I couldn't help but feel like I had seen it before, when it suddenly popped into my mind.

"Wait, isn't that the Dicateous?" I gasped, peeking out from underneath my cloak as I turned to Professor Gideon.

"No," he said, his voice barely audible against the wind. "It's worse."

"Wait, it's not the Dicateous?" I asked, taking another glance at the familiar ship to make sure.

While I wasn't able to see the departure of the monumental ship because it overlapped with the start of my second year at Xyrus Academy, I had seen it when it was still being constructed. I could still remember quite clearly the first time I had laid eyes on the mysterious craft that spewed black smoke like some sort of metallic dragon. To be able to carry hundreds of people and still traverse the unknown dangers of the ocean, it was hard to believe it at that time.

"What do you mean worse?" Varay cut in as she surveyed our surroundings, her hand resting firmly on the pommel of the thin sword strapped to her waist.

"Leave the horses here. We'll need to go on foot if we want to get to that wreckage site." Ignoring us both, Professor Gideon swung his leg over his horse, dismounting rather clumsily. "Emily, Himes! Grab the bag!"

I opened my mouth to ask again, exasperated by how constantly the professor kept doing things at his own pace, disregarding everyone else. However, with a consoling squeeze on the shoulder from Emily, I just let out a sigh and we followed Professor Gideon. The old inventor was already making his way down the rocky slope to the shore rather nimbly despite how wet the rocks were. Varay and Himes trailed closely behind, both of them with their necks stretched, looking for any signs of danger as they easily hopped from one stone to another.

"I'm going to need the ship completely out of the water. Can either one of you ladies do the honors?" Professor Gideon turned his head, switching glances between Varay

and me.

My hand shot up in the air.

“Let me tr—” I volunteered excitedly before remembering what Master Aldir had constantly warned me about. “I mean, Varay should do it.”

The lance gave me a sympathetic look before getting to work. The task wasn’t hard for her; with a simple wave of her hand, she swept the tides back enough to reveal the whole ship, then she took a moment to conjure a wall of ice around the remains of the wreckage to keep the water from spilling back in.

Varay made an opening in the ice fortress for us to enter through and almost immediately after crossing, I stopped to gaze in awe.

Perhaps it was because I had only seen the Dicateous during its construction, but many of the features I remembered about the ship, from its large metal frame and multiple cylindrical pipes, undoubtedly resembled this large contraption. Regardless, neither of these two metallic monstrosities looked nothing like the wooden sailboats that I was accustomed to.

Further inspection of the large craft led me to notice the reason why it had been stranded here, partly sunken, in the first place. Apart from the more obvious dents that had deformed the base of the ship, there were rows of puncture marks as well.

“Don’t those kind of look like... bite marks?” I marveled, walking toward the side of the ship.

“Dang, imagine how big the monster was to have a mouth that could take a chomp at this,” Emily sighed.

I couldn’t help but grow more and more curious the longer I studied the giant boat. If it truly was not Dicateous, then what was it? Who had built it? For what purpose did it come to this continent?

Another observation I drew was that, while the thick metal frame had incurred fairly substantial damages, it didn’t seem... old. There weren’t any signs of rust that I knew happened to most metals left in places like this for too long.

“Well then, on we go,” Professor Gideon grunted, stepping into one of the larger holes

that had punctured through the bottom of the ship.

“Wait.” Varay held up her arm to halt the professor. Before he could respond, the lance sent a large pulse of mana through the abandoned ship.

“No signs of life,” she confirmed.

“An unnecessary precaution, but thanks,” Professor Gideon grumbled, climbing into the hole at the base of the ship.

“Don’t go too far ahead, Master!” Emily ran in after him, her eyes practically twinkling in excitement.

Looking at Varay, I couldn’t help but notice the faint traces of concern on her normally expressionless face. Even after checking for any potential dangers, there was still something worrying the lance.

Upon stepping inside the ship after Himes, my nose caught on to the acrid smell of wood rotting. The air was heavy and warm, and bitter to the tongue, forcing me to breathe through my nose despite the less-than-pleasant aroma of molding lumber.

The lower levels were spacious, with not much inside except for the columns of iron—some broken, others bent—that had once supported the ceiling. Shattered remains of wooden crates littered the floor but whatever was inside most likely had either perished or been washed away by the ocean water.

I could see the old inventor studying the remains of whatever he could find before he and Himes climbed up the metal stairs leading to the next floor up. This left me, Emily, and Varay to explore the abandoned vessel on our own accord; only, we had no idea what it was we were searching for, and why we were here in the first place.

After finding little else of interest, we weaved through the mounds of seaweed and sand that had infiltrated the ship and followed after Professor Gideon and his butler to the floor above.

It was easy to figure out that the bottommost levels of this abandoned ship had been used as mostly storage, but the strange thing was that everything was destroyed. Varay had been the one to point it out, but even if she hadn’t revealed that fact, I would’ve still put together the traces. On the metal floors—where shattered remnants of items lay scattered—were blackened marks of what looked like soot; someone or some

people had deliberately wiped all traces of what could've been used as valuable pieces of information.

"Looks like whoever was on this ship didn't want anyone knowing who they were," I said, kicking some debris in hopes of finding anything of value.

Varay looked around, but stayed close to Emily and I, in case something were to pop up.

"What's weird is that even the upper floors here are damp for some reason. How did the water come all the way up here when the ship was only half-sunken?" Emily pointed out, running her hand along the wooden floor, only to come up wet.

"That's because, until a few weeks ago, this ship was fully submerged in the ocean." We all looked over our shoulders to see Professor Gideon and Himes walking down the stairs from the floor above us.

"Which is why no one had seen this ship, despite its size, until recently," Varay concluded.

The inventor simply nodded as he and Himes made their way to us. "The journal I was reading earlier was written by a group of adventurers who were coming back from a scouting mission. They had taken the same route to reach their destination, but it was only on the way back that the tides had receded enough to reveal this.

"I see. Master, then what do you think happened to all the crewmembers that were on this ship?" Emily asked. "Do you think they all drowned?"

"No." Professor Gideon shook his head. "There would be at least some remains of human bodies left on this ship."

Emily and I exchanged glances, not quite catching on to what the old inventor was getting at.

Letting out a sigh, Professor Gideon squatted in front of the blackened mark on the floor and scratched at it with his finger. "It means you're right, Princess. The people on here definitely did not want them seeing this ship, let alone whatever and whoever they had inside."

"That means that—"

“Yes. Either they all escaped and are out there somewhere... or perhaps, their captain oh-so-kindly nudged them off the ship.”

“I had a hunch when I first saw the ship but does that mean...” Varay’s voice trailed off as she stared intently at Professor Gideon.

“After reading the report, I wished dearly to whatever divine being was watching over us that my guess would be wrong, but I don’t think it is,” he sighed.

“What—what is it? What is going on?” I butted in, their solemn tones filling me with unease.

“I had assumed that the crew of the Dicatheous went through some troubles when we lost contact with them a few years back, so when I read the the report, I thought maybe—just maybe, the crew had somehow repaired the ship and almost made it back. But the materials used to build this, down to the very frame of this ship, differ ever-so-slightly in design.

“After coming here, I’m positive that this ship isn’t, and never was, the Dicatheous. It’s still a little rough around the edges, but the technology put into this ship was top secret, known only to me and few of the key designers,” Professor Gideon explained.

Emily drew in a sharp breath, her eyes wide with fear as the horrifying reality began to dawn on everyone here. “Master, you can’t mean to say—”

“It’s exactly what I mean to say,” Professor Gideon interrupted. “Think about it— the fact that there are no corpses, no personal belongings left behind. There are almost no discernable traces that anyone has ever been here. Why? Because the leader of this ship didn’t want their enemy to know that they are capable of making this. And with good reason; the very fact that this exists changes the very dynamics of this war.”

“And by war, you mean...” my voice trailed off into silence. I locked eyes with Varay and she nodded, her eyes stern and grave. My hands trembled as I brought them up to my mouth.

Professor Gideon sprung up from the ground, handing his bag to Himes. “Yes, Princess. It means that Alacrya has, in their arsenal, the ability to build ships capable of carrying whole battalions across the ocean to Dicathen.”

Chapter 128

Necessary Resolve

VIRION ERALITH'S POV:

“Damn it!” Glayder cursed, slamming his fists down on the long rectangular table we were currently gathered around. “And you’re absolutely sure about this, Gideon?”

“Like I said, Your Majesty, the part about the ship belonging to the Alacryan Army is merely a speculation on my part. However, I am absolutely sure that the ship we have just come from is not the Dicateous,” the old inventor answered.

It hadn’t even been an hour since Gideon, Varay and my granddaughter had arrived to the castle. After Varay told us about the information they had found, everyone, including King and Queen Glayder, were summoned. With the arrival of the asura, Lord Aldir, and my son and his wife, who had been in negotiations with the dwarves, the meeting was hastily put into motion...

“What makes you so certain?” Glayder pestered on.

Gideon let out a harsh sigh before continuing. “Because, during the construction of the Dicateous, I had placed markers throughout the base of the ship—kind of like a signature, if you will.”

“A signature?” my son, Alduin, echoed.

“Well, the Dicateous was an invention that I took most pride in. I wanted future generations to know of my work,” he confessed, scratching his nose in embarrassment. “At any rate, out of all the exposed frames that I scoured in this ship, none of them had the marking. In fact, entirely different substances were used to construct the frame.”

“Damn it all!” Blaine Glayder swore once more, getting up from his seat.

“Calm yourself, Blaine,” I quipped.

“Calm myself? Did you not just hear Gideon’s words? I’m sorry but I can’t just keep

calm after finding out that our enemy is capable of sending tens—no, hundreds of thousands of soldiers and mages across the ocean. It's bad enough that we've been having trouble sniffing out those bastards from inside the dungeons of the Beast Glades, but—"

"Enough," Lord Aldir asserted, silencing the human king at once. "Varay, what are your thoughts on the matter?"

"While I have no extensive knowledge on the construction of the Dicatheous, I agree with what the artificer thinks. The lack of evidence on the ship alone tells us that whoever was on the ship didn't want anyone finding out who they were," the lance affirmed, standing against the wall behind Priscilla Glayder.

"What do you suppose the probability is that this was a trap, or rather, a strategy on their part to get us to think that they have the technology to send ships filled with soldiers to Dicathen?" I voiced aloud to no one in particular.

"Hmm, it's possible that might be the case." Gideon was the one to answer as he mulled over the hypothetical scenario.

"That's right!" Blaine came back to the table, delighted at the fact that the worst-case scenario might not be the only future of this war. "It makes sense! If the Alacryans made us think that they had the ability to make these ships, then it would force us to split our troops!"

"That might be so, but the location where the ship had washed up makes me uncertain. If the Alacryan's goal was really to divide our forces, it would make more sense for them to leave it somewhere along the western coast—where they would want us to think they will attack. Also, that cove, where the ship was found, is much too inconspicuous of a place to have them hope that we'll somehow come across it. With the tide levels changing so frequently and the bedrocks constantly corroding, it's a miracle that we were able to find the ship in the first place," my son rebutted.

The meeting hall was quiet for a moment until Lord Aldir spoke up. "Whatever the probability might be, the question is, is it worth the risk? The Alacryan, Cynthia, was under the impression that her people were trying to amass an army over time within the depths of the Beast Glades, but it would be foolish to blindly believe that that was the only move the Vritras had planned. I have known a few from the Vritra Clan; they are intelligent and cunning adversaries. It's unlike them to act so linear in their

strategy.”

“Whatever the case, we have no choice but to prepare ourselves for a two-pronged attack,” I concluded, rubbing my temples. “Alduin, Merial, how are the discussions with the dwarves faring?”

“They’re still skeptical toward the notion of fully cooperating, but they’ve agreed to send some of their shapers to help in the fortification of the walls along the Grand Mountains,” Merial answered as she handed over a pile of papers to me.

“Good,” I nodded. “It’s a start. We’ll need as much help from their mages to reinforce the gaps that the Grand Mountains don’t cover between Sapin and the Beast Glades.

“Merial, allow me and my wife to join you in your next visit to the Kingdom of Darv. With this news, we’ll need help from the dwarves if we’re going to fortify the cities along the western coast in time. Besides, we were closer to the Greysunders than you two. Perhaps the dwarves will be more inclined to cooperate with us there.” Both Blaine and Priscilla looked uneasy as their glances flickered between my son and his wife, and at Lord Aldir, the one who had actually killed the traitorous Dwarven King and Queen.

“That sounds like a good idea. We’ll need the dwarves’ help if we’re going to win this war. I think they’ll be more apt to help us after they find out our enemies have the capability of sending thousands of soldiers across the ocean,” I voiced. “Now, if everyone will excuse me, I’m going to get some rest for the first time in a few days.”

I dipped my head at Lord Aldir and dismissed everyone else with a wave. Walking out of the meeting hall, I let out a deep breath. Despite the two years that Lord Aldir had been here, it was still stifling being near the asura.

He had done much to prepare us for the war, and had been tactical in his approach. He barely showed himself at meetings, often teaching me one-on-one so that I could be the one to head the war. With his insight on both large-scale and small-scale battle tactics, we’ve been doing a good job keeping the fights away from the general public. However, if Gideon’s speculations are true, then it won’t be long until everyone, soldier or not, would be involved one way or another.

“Commander Virion,” a soft voice came from behind.

I turned around to see Varay walking toward me, her expression full of concern.

“Commander, allow me to apologize for allowing Princess Tessia to come along. I know that your exact orders were for me to keep her away from danger but—”

“Varay, it’s fine.” I held up my hand to stop her. “I know how she can be, and to tell you the truth, I’ve been expecting something like this to happen from her. Now, off you go; Little Princess Glayder must be waiting for you.”

The lance’s face still showed traces of concern and guilt, but with another wave, she lowered her head in a bow and went off in the direction of the training grounds.

Taking a left down the long corridor, I stopped in front of a particular oakwood door. Taking another breath, I held my hand up in a fist and knocked thrice.

“Who is it?” the muffled voice of my granddaughter called out from inside.

I cleared my throat. “It’s your grandfather.”

“I want to be alone,” she replied instantly.

“Come now,” I sighed. “Don’t say that.”

There was only silence at first, but after a few seconds, I heard the faint sounds of approaching footsteps. The reinforced wooden door opened just a crack as my granddaughter’s eyes peeked through from the other side.

“Are you going to scold me for going to the ship with Varay?” she asked, her mouth hidden behind the door.

“No, I’m not.”

The child regarded me silently, her brow raised in suspicion. “Because I was the one that forced her to take me.”

I nodded. “Yes, I figured as much.”

“And I’m not going to apologize for that,” my granddaughter pressed on as she tried to hold her stern gaze.

“I’m sure you won’t.”

“W-Well good.” Her expression faltered as she looked confused.

I took a step back from the door. “Now, will you take a walk with your grandfather?”

I waited for my granddaughter as she closed the door and timidly trailed behind me like a shadow.

“This way.” I gestured with my head. “There’s something I want to show you.”

We walked down the corridor in silence as I hummed a small tune.

“Hey, that’s the lullaby that Father used to sing to me,” my granddaughter exclaimed.

“Well who do you think taught it to him?” I chuckled. “My mother, your great grandmother, used to sing it to me when I couldn’t sleep at night. I sang it to your father whenever he was too scared to go to sleep. But don’t tell him I told you this.”

The child giggled as she nodded. “Where are we going anyways, Grandpa?”

“You’ll see soon enough, Child.” We took another turn and descended a flight of spiral stairs, stopping in front of a set of doors large enough to easily admit giants.

Placing a palm in the center of the door, I released a wave of mana. The locks and mechanisms that kept the room secure clicked in rapid succession as scores of intricate patterns unravelled themselves into place. As the sounds receded, the door slid open to reveal a large earthen field surrounded by mana-enhanced metal. Off to the side was another door that was the same material as the wall around it.

“We’re almost here,” I said, pointing to the door.

“I’ve never been inside here before. What’s this room for?” my granddaughter asked as she looked around.

“This is the place where the lances, guild leaders, and I get trained by Lord Aldir. The asura set it up himself so that it could withstand even the attacks of white-core mages; of course, that is only Lord Aldir is here with us to activate it. But before you go on exploring, there is something you need to see.” I pushed open the door to the room inside the isolated training arena.

The inside of the room had nothing but a few chairs, a drawing board, and an empty

screen with a visual recording artifact in front of it.

“Take a seat, Ch—” I stopped myself as I stood next to the artifact. “Take a seat, Tessia.”

My granddaughter planted herself in the chair in front of me, facing the white screen. She looked at me with uncertain eyes and for a second, I just wanted take her back to her room where she’d be safe.

Letting out a deep breath, I turned on the visual recording artifact. A bright light shot out from the front and onto the screen, projecting a moving picture recorded from the battlefield.

“This, Tessia, is what the war is like.” I moved out of the way and let her watch.

It was a particularly brutal battle in the depths of a dungeon where the Alacryan soldiers had been setting camp. There had been hundreds of mages and warriors that had been waiting for further orders. Our men had little idea of what they would be walking into while the Alacryan side had already received warning from their scouts that enemies would soon arrive.

I could see the horror in my granddaughter’s eyes, watching with jaw slack as the massacre went on. Our side had lost over fifty in the first few seconds but even after we had recuperated, the battle was bloody and intense. Fresh corpses lay sprawled all over the ground as mages and warriors alike continued to shoot and at each other. Even without the sound, I could clearly imagine the screams from the injured and dying.

The video ended abruptly as the mage holding the artifact had been killed in that moment. There was a moment of silence as both my granddaughter and I mulled over the images on the screen.

“This was a real life recording from a battle just five days ago. We lost two hundred men and twenty mages in that battle alone out of the four hundred we sent down into that dungeon. I was the one who had given them the order to go down, and it’s on my shoulders that they’re all dead.” I locked eyes with my granddaughter, my gaze cold and unyielding.

“The war has only just begun, but I have already done things—made choices—that I will never forgive myself for. As your grandfather, this is what I want to keep you away from,” I said, pointing to the screen. “It is my selfishness as your grandfather that I

want to keep you safe and away from harm, regardless of how much of an asset you may be in battle.”

Tess lowered her gaze. “Grandpa...”

“Tessia. You are, no doubt, a tremendously talented mage and, with the training that you’ve undergone these past two years, would be a force to be reckoned with in the war. But no matter how powerful you are in a war, you are only one person. All it takes is one mistake, one small blunder. That is why I’ve forbidden you to take part in any of the battles... until now.”

“Until now?” My granddaughter looked up. I couldn’t help but just stare at her tiny face. It felt like just a week ago that she was still sitting on my lap, chirping “grandpa” with her hands held high.

“Tessia. Even after seeing just a glimpse of what you will have to endure, do you still want to be a part of the battle?” I asked, walking over to the back of the room.

My granddaughter’s expression hardened as she stood up. “Yes.”

Picking up two dulled training swords from the rack, I tossed one to her. “Then prove your resolve.”

Chapter 129

Concealed Burdens

“So you understand the rules of this battle?” I confirmed, gripping the edgeless sword in my right hand.

“Grandpa...” My granddaughter’s eyes softened as she hesitated. However, from my unrelenting expression, she hardened herself, raising her sword. “I understand.”

I nodded approvingly. “Integrate.”

My body burned with untamed excitement as I released the second form of my beast’s will. As my skin and even my clothes darkened, wrapped in a veil of shadow, I took a step toward Tessia.

With my heightened senses, I could hear the quickening pace of my granddaughter’s heartbeat as she waited for me to make a move.

As far as I was concerned, the battle had already begun.

Closing the gap between us, I thrust the pommel of my sword into Tessia’s stomach. Lurching forward in response, I could tell from the force of impact that she had taken a step back in time to decrease the strength of the blow.

Putting distance between us, any trace of uncertainty had been wiped clean off the child’s face as her eyes now regarded me as an opponent.

“Good,” I let out a growl as I slowly circled around her. Tessia’s heartbeat steadied as she prepared herself.

“Acquire,” she muttered as a thin layer of emerald green enveloped her like a second skin. The aura around her then exploded out from under her feet, spreading through the grass.

I jumped back in time to avoid a root as thick a tree that erupted from the ground beneath me. The entire ground affected by the aura soon became a web of dense vines

that spread around the child like snakes protecting their master.

Tessia was already advancing towards me, dashing atop a trail of vines that led toward me, her sword shining a brilliant green.

I couldn't help but reveal a smile at the outright pressure her domain contained from the perspective of an opponent.

I held my sword up as I easily sidestepped another thick tendril. Using the thick roots as stepping stones, I augmented my sword in time to meet Tessia's blade.

Our weapons clashed, producing a shriek as sparks were sent scattering into the air. Using her forward momentum, I fell back, grabbing onto her sword hand as I stamped her leading foot to stop her from regaining balance.

As she fell forward, I prepared to twist her into a throw when a thin vine wrapped itself around the child's waist, preventing her fall.

Using the vine to keep herself afloat, Tessia lashed out with both her feet to send me flying back.

Blocking her kick with the flat of my blade, I was unable to contain my excitement, exclaiming, "Haha! Your control over your beast will has gotten much better!" If it was anyone else, I'd be impressed if they had managed to defend against her unorthodox counter.

Releasing more mana out into my limbs, I flashed toward Tessia, avoiding the barrage of tendrils meant to protect their master.

We exchanged blows on top of the ever-changing terrain of roots that wriggled and convulsed at my granddaughter's beckoning. Tessia moved gracefully atop the vines, easily using them as platforms to maneuver in all directions. Her movement and swordplay utilizing both her beast will and wind attribute spells resembled an elegant dance in the air, as if every step, swing, and lunge she executed had been choreographed. I couldn't be more proud of my granddaughter, who had matured so much as a mage—she had come far, that much was certain. However, letting her win too easily would only make her complacent.

Her domain transformed the surrounding area to her advantage. However, if her opponent was as quick and agile enough as I was, he'd be able to take advantage of the

vines as well, and use them as a route to get to Tessia. My fighting style especially, which consisted of erratic movement to utilize the full potential of the shadow panther's innate stealth, excelled in this environment.

Soon, both the tendrils and Tessia were having a hard time keeping up with my movements as I constantly flitted atop the wave of vines that my granddaughter had conjured.

The child was nearly in range of my sword and she had lost track of me, but just as I stretched my arm out to swing, she sunk into the depths of the vines below us. As Tessia disappeared inside, the countless tendrils beneath me began congregating to one spot.

I quickly hopped away as the green tendrils gathered to form a protective sphere around what I assumed was Tessia.

For a second, I was afraid that she had lost control again like last time. But as the shell of vines burst apart, I could whistle in admiration at the sight of my granddaughter.

"You did it!" I exclaimed, my voice coming out much huskier than normal because of the integration.

"Hehe!" My granddaughter pointed her sword at me with a wide grin on her face. "Be careful, Grandpa!"

Her body, now covered in a thick, emerald aura, coiled around her. Tessia's fair skin had lightened to a pale, ivory tone while her hair and even eyebrows had changed to a forest green shade. The child's turquoise eyes shined brighter, with intricate markings spreading around her eyes making her seem... otherworldly—celestial, almost.

As she launched herself toward me, the translucent aura surrounding her already began lashing out attacks. While Tessia's pressure didn't contain the same bloodlust Arthur or other experienced mages and warriors had, it was still a shocking improvement to her previous, lackluster aura.

I had already known that Tessia's beast will was much more powerful than mine and that, in direct combat, my beast's will had the disadvantage. However, I couldn't resist the urge to go head to head with my granddaughter at her strongest—she, who had been training so relentlessly these past two years to not become a burden to anyone

close to her.

Tessia had no use for the training sword as the translucent green aura surrounding her molded itself into two emerald blades in her hands. As she spun into a flurry of slashes with her dual mana swords, I couldn't help but become overwhelmed by the never-ending whirlwind of attacks. She hacked and twirled relentlessly, sometimes looking for openings, other times making them. Tessia wasn't a master in the art of dual-wielding, but the openings she had, her aura would defend. It wasn't just the two blades in her hands that were her weapons—she was able to mold her aura into almost whatever shape she saw fit.

Just when I thought I had found an opening, the aura enveloping her would mold into another weapon to block my attack as Tessia continued her bombardment.

Fresh nicks and cuts emerged from my body, splashing drops of blood on the grass around me as I avoided with all my wit, wondering why I had been stupid enough to think that taking her head on would be a good idea. What put me at unease was that it seemed like the child was incurring damage as well; blotches of red had spread from underneath the tight-fitting blouse she wore for fighting.

However, I soon noticed that the emerald aura covering her had become thinner and more transparent. The glowing runes embellishing the child's face receded as her face crumpled in a painful cringe.

As her movements dulled and her attacks slowed, I grabbed her by the arm and buckled her legs from behind her knee, gently bringing her to the ground as the rest of her beast will aura dissipated.

"I-I... lost. I couldn't do it, Grandpa. I couldn't even land a clean hit after all of that," she panted, gasping for breath. As my granddaughter lay sprawled out on the field of grass covered in cuts and bruises acquired, not from me, but from the intensity of her beast's will, I couldn't help but imagine her out in the battlefield; the state she would be reduced to in battle where her opponent had no intention of looking out for her well-being.

Getting rid of such poisonous thoughts, I sat down beside her.

I studied the child's face silently for a moment, but with a resigned sigh, I shook my head. "Out on the battlefield, you are to address me as Commander, not Grandpa."

Tessia's eyes lit up brighter than when she had released her integration phase. "Does that mean...? Th-Thank—"

"But!" I interrupted. "I have a few conditions."

"Okay," she replied, her gaze firm.

"You must still get both your mother and father's consent. You must also keep in mind the gravity of who you are. Whoever is leading your team or battalion will definitely mention it, but it is up to you to not become a liability. If your teammates are under the impression that you cannot take care of yourself, I will have you rescinded from the fight immediately because the ones around you will be too concerned for your safety to act effectively in battle. Is that clear?"

"Yes!" Tessia nodded feverishly.

"Oh, and also. Try not to be caught in a situation where you need to use your second phase. I'm not sure if it's because you haven't fully learned to control it, but that form makes you too reckless," I added, thinking to when she had attacked me madly, relying solely on her beast will to defend her.

"Master Aldir told me that too. He said that the beast will that I had assimilated with is different, although he couldn't really put a finger on why," the child admitted.

As we both got up and headed back out of the training room, I stopped her to say one last thing. "Child. From here on out, I can no longer be your grandfather. The actions I had taken and the decisions I had made concerning you have always been for your safety and happiness. However, now that you are a soldier, I must treat you like one. Whether it is me directly giving you an order, or another person in charge of the team you are in, you must keep in mind that the orders given will not place your safety above all of Dicathen. This is my final warning to you."

My granddaughter looked at me, studying the pained expression I had on my face, then buried her face into my chest into an embrace. "It's okay Grand—I mean, Commander. Dicathen is my home and I will do whatever it takes to protect it and the people I love."

"Yes, I know," I mumbled. "That is what I am afraid of."

After shooing her away, I remained in the training grounds for a bit longer before heading to a different room on a lower floor.

Approaching the isolated room down on the lower level beneath the basement of the castle, the sharp smell of various medicinal herbs filled my nose.

I opened the door at the very end of the narrow corridor.

“C-Commander Virion! My apologies, I was not expecting anyone to visit,” the middle-aged nurse said as she frantically scrambled out of her chair.

“No need to apologize, Anna; I came here on a whim. How is she?” I asked, lowering my gaze to the woman lying unconscious in bed.

“I just finished administering the necessary supplements to keep her body healthy. Physically speaking, she is in great shape, but no matter what we try, we can’t get her to wake up,” Anna sighed, placing a hand gently on Cynthia’s arm.

“So same as always?” I let out a faint smile. “Anna, do you mind giving me some time alone with her?”

“Of course! I mean—not at all! I’ll get out of your hair. Take your time!” she answered, hurriedly heading towards the door as she picked up some trash on the way out.

Slumping down on the wooden chair beside the bed, I closed my eyes. This wasn’t the first or second time I had come here. It seemed like, these days, I came to this room whenever I wanted some time alone or wanted to get away from the suffocating pressure the war continued to afflict on me.

“My old friend. How goes your slumber? I’m not sure you knew this but I think the Alacryan Army is capable of building steamships and is most likely using them to transport tens of thousands of soldiers. I’m sure you didn’t know. After all, you were already here when the Dicateous began construction,” I sighed, staring blankly at Cynthia’s peaceful face.

“You know, I just gave permission to Tessia to start fighting in real battles. Can you believe it?” I laughed aloud. “I’m sure you’d be pretty surprised by that choice if you were awake right now. But... I was afraid. I knew how much she wanted to make a difference and be a part of the fight, and I know how stubborn she is. I was afraid that she’d run away and go off to fight, even without my consent. I just thought that if she was going to actually take part in this war, it should at least be under supervision.”

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “That’s probably a lie. I think, more

than that, I just didn't want her to keep hating me. Pft! And I just told her that I'm going to treat her as a soldier, not my granddaughter. What a load of bullcrap, right?" I scoffed, shaking my head.

"But still, It's hard, Cynthia—doing all of this, I mean. I stepped down as king because I wanted to avoid doing what I'm doing right now. And what I'm doing right now is on a much bigger scale. I have an asura making sure I am fit emotionally, mentally, and physically to lead this war while all of the lances and guild leaders answer to my beck and call. Is it pathetic of me to want nothing more than to sit in my garden, watching my granddaughter grow up peacefully? What sort of cruel joke is it to send my own granddaughter to battle?

"Alduin and his wife, Blaine and Priscilla... they're all doing what they can to help, but in the end, they turn to me for orders now that Lord Aldir has condemned me as the only fit leader." I let out another deep, trembling breath as I ran my hands down the length of my face. "Cynthia, I've already lived a few dozen years longer than my wife. I don't want to live longer than my child and grandchild. I don't think I can take it."

I reached my hand out toward Cynthia, afraid that she might crumble at my touch. Finally, I gathered the courage to finally place my hand on top of hers. "I never apologized to you. Even after Lord Aldir removed the curse on you, I had the feeling that something was wrong. You knew, didn't you? You knew that it wasn't fully removed and that you might die if you revealed information about Alacrya, about the Vritra, right? I think I sensed that fact as well, back then. But I didn't stop you. For a chance to gain the higher ground in this war, I allowed you to succumb to this state..." I stopped talking, trying to keep my voice steady. "And I'm sorry for that. I shouldn't have let you do that to yourself. There might be people that shun you for being a spy, but I would never. You chose to go stand up to your own people to help ours. Making that choice makes you stronger than anyone else here."

I rose from the chair, quickly rubbing my eyes with the ends of my sleeves before heading out. Turning back, I took one last glance at my old friend. "The true war is going to start soon. I won't be able to come back down here for a while, my friend, but I promise you that after this war is over, I will do whatever it takes to wake you back up."

Chapter 130

From Princess to Soldier

TESSIA ERALITH'S POV:

“Darvus, switch positions with Stannard!” I swung my blade, creating an arc of wind that knocked away the armored gnoll—a nasty mana beast that was more like a bipedal, rabid dog—that had tried to catch me off guard.

“Careful, Leader! If you die on us, your grandfather will murder us all!” Darvus warned, a wide grin visible underneath his dented helmet.

“Bite me!” I snorted, parrying the downswing of another assault mage’s axe with my sword. “Do you want me to count all of the times I saved your ass?”

“Don’t start a battle you can’t win, Darvus!” Caria mocked as she nimbly dodged a spiked club, following up with an uppercut at a fanged orc’s jaw.

“Stannard, have you found the pack leader yet? These gnolls just keep coming out of nowhere.” Darvus twirled two hatchets before launching them at a nearby gnoll.

“Not yet,” our blonde-haired mage called out from behind.

“Hey, Leader. I’m thinking we should fall back. The numbers are too much for just our team to handle without overexerting ourselves.” Darvus unclipped his two large battle axes from his back and decapitated a large orc.

“I think you’re right. We should at least fall back into the range of our conjurers.” I thrust my thin blade underneath the seam of the armored gnoll’s breastplate. Its rabid, dog-like face contorted in pain as it crumpled to the floor.

“Those lucky wand-wavers, sitting behind the lines and firing off spells while they gossip with each other,” Darvus grumbled as he caved a sword-wielding gnoll’s chest with the blunt end of his axe.

“Hey!” Stannard exclaimed. “That’s degrading!”

Ignoring my team members' complaints, I hopped back next to Stannard. "Stannard, I'm going to hold them down. Go all out, okay?"

"Understood," he acknowledged. "Darvus, Caria, better get out of the way!"

Sheathing my sword, I released the first phase of my beast will to strengthen my spell. Placing my palms on the ground, I concentrated.

[Ivy Prison]

A wave of vines shot up from the ground, entangling both the large orcs and the gnolls that were coming through an opening on the far side of the cavern.

Stannard, the frail-looking mage beside me, aimed a device that looked like a narrow crossbow at the horde of mana beasts now rooted to the ground. As he inserted a small orb into the tip of his arrow-less crossbow, his pale blue eyes narrowed in concentration.

The embedded gem glowed bright red as he waited for the right timing. As soon as both Darvus and Caria had cleared out of the way, Stannard unleashed his attack.

[Propulsion Blast]

Like a cannon gone mad, a fiery blast exploded from the tip of Stannard's device, nearly blowing the small-framed mage off his feet.

We all stared blankly at the scene in front of us; orcs and gnolls burned as the wave behind them were trapped in the wall of fire ignited by their own comrades' bodies.

"Another new spell you mixed up?" Darvus queried, his eyes still looking at the fiery blaze just a dozen meters away.

"Yup!" Stannard replied, strapping his device across his shoulder. "The rebound is a bit painful though."

"That's why I'm telling you that you should train your body more with me," Caria wagged her gloved finger at him.

"And I'm telling you that there's no way in hell that I'd train with you, you compact package of savagery!" Stannard retorted. "I still have nightmares about that day!"

“Guys, let’s save the banter for when we’re back with the rest of the other teams. That fire won’t hold them back for long,” I cut in. With that, we headed back through the narrow corridor we had come from, making sure there weren’t any mana beasts following us.

After making our way back through the long cavern, I saw the flickering purple light that indicated the main base—the place that I’d called home for the past few months.

“I wonder what food they’ll have ready?” Darvus mused, licking his lips.

“Probably the same old mush they call ‘food.’ I swear, the cooks purposely make it as unappetizing as possible so no one will want seconds,” Stannard sighed as we drew closer to the purple light.

“Any chance that our leader, that we love and appreciate so much and also happens to be a princess, can hook her precious teammates with some real food?” Darvus asked with a twinkling look in his eyes.

“Gross!” Caria cringed beside me. “If you want to beg for favors, you’re better off covering your face while you do so.”

“Don’t hate me because I’m beautiful, shorty!” Darvus stuck his chin out so we could truly behold his rugged but sharp face. The human would be considered objectively handsome despite his unkempt appearance and self-inflating attitude.

“I’m petite! And I’m cute too! Right, Tessia?” she snapped back at him before turning to me and grabbing my arm.

“Oh please. Stannard here is what you call petite. He can pass off as a ten-year-old, after all. You, on the other hand, are just short and barbaric.” Darvus stuck out his tongue.

“Is there really a need for you to include me in your squabble!” Stannard exclaimed, offended. He was always sensitive whenever someone called him short or small.

“Guys! Who cares if we’re pretty, cute or handsome? We’re in a dungeon, covered in blood, sweat and grime. Is there really a need to look attractive down here?” I sighed as we reached the iron wall protecting the camp.

“Tch. As expected of someone who’s been blessed with true beauty. Our leader would

never understand the hardships that normal girls have to go through to find a man," Caria pouted.

"Stop it. What true beauty?" I scoffed, shaking my head.

"It's true," Darius agreed. "If it weren't for the fact that you're Commander Virion's precious granddaughter, and the fact that you could easily beat me up, I'd have already made a move on you."

"I can only beat you with my beast will activated," I retorted.

"Alas, our love is still not meant to be. I prefer my women flaunty and easy," Darvus sighed with longing.

"Gross," Caria and I said in unison.

After knocking on the mana-enhanced iron wall, a slit opened in the middle and a pair of sharp eyes regarded us for a moment.

As the eyes landed on me, they widened. "Princess Tessia!"

"Yes, now please open the door," I replied, looking up at the flickering purple light inside the lantern bolted to the ceiling.

The metal slit closed and the purple light changed to red, indicating to clear the way.

Just then, the dark wall split apart at the seam in the middle. The harsh grinding of metal on stone echoed off the walls of the narrow cavern until the doors opened enough to admit us one at a time.

As we stepped through the doorway, the warmth of several burning fires in earthen pits and the smell of indiscernible herbs and meat greeted us. The narrow hallway we had just come from opened up to a massive cavern with a naturally formed vaulted ceiling high above us. High up near the ceiling, large holes were dug into the walls where archers and conjurers lay inside, ready to fire at any intruders.

Artificial light from orbs lined the walls far below them to brighten the immense cavern that over a hundred soldiers and mages had set camp in. An underground stream gurgled near the side of the cavern, providing fresh water for all of the soldiers stationed here.

“Welcome back, Princess.” The sentry guarding the door bowed. I waved him off with a quick nod as my teammates followed close behind me.

After arriving at the small space where my team and I had set up camp, I went directly inside the tent. Caria and I shared and gathered a new set of clothes and a towel.

Opening the flap of the tent, I could see Darvus trying to light a fire while Caria watched Stannard disassemble and clean his crossbow-like weapon. I couldn’t help but smile at how far the four of us had come in these past three months.

I still distinctly remembered when I had first been introduced to this group after gaining my grandfather’s approval to go out to battle. Darvus, fourth son of the Clarell House, was a lazy, spoiled, arrogant ass. But he was also an exceptionally talented prodigy in mana control and had the reflexes to match.

The Clarell Family had been a distinguished family for centuries, known for their unique and secretive style of augmented axemanship. Despite a history of fooling around and skipping out on training, from what Caria had told me, the wild-haired Darvus was still a far better axeman and fighter than any of his older brothers. His father, tired of his son’s lackadaisical attitude toward everything, had sent him to battle after Darvus had reached the solid-yellow core stage.

It was a nightmare in the beginning; Darvus looked down on me and considered me a liability after taking one look. Even after I had beat him down, having to resort to using my beast will, he still saw me unfit as a leader and did as he wanted. He only really cared about two things, and that was flirting with sleazy women and watching out for his childhood friend, Caria.

“Tessia? You know, you look pretty silly with just your head sticking out of the tent,” Caria said with her head tilted.

“Ah, no, I was about to get out. I’m going to take a shower,” I replied, somewhat flustered.

“Don’t be too long, Princess. The longer you wash, the more tempted I get to peek,” Darvus called out lazily, lying on his side by the fire.

“Then I’ll make sure to have you locked up every night with those old, pot-bellied men you love so much,” I threatened, carrying my clothes and towel over my shoulder.

“Can you stop with those indecent taunts?” Caria snapped as she kicked the arm that Darvus had been leaning his head on, causing the axe wielder to smash his head on the hard stone ground.

“Gah! Oww! Can we not always resort to violence, you vicious little mouse?” Darvus cried, rubbing the side of his head.

“You were asking for it,” Stannard chuckled from his seat, putting down his weapon. “Darvus, where did you put the beast cores we collected?”

“They’re over there,” he grumbled, pointing to the bag by their separate tent.

As I made my way toward the stream, I glanced over my shoulder to see Caria rubbing her childhood friend’s head, making sure he was okay. I wonder when she is going to gather the courage to confess to Darvus.

Caria Rede was just as headstrong as Darvus, if not more, but also bright and optimistic despite the harsh environment she was raised in. The Rede Family served the Clarell Family for many generations, but when Caria’s mother had failed to produce any males, Caria, the oldest of the daughters, was raised as if she was a male, trained to protect a member of the Clarell Family: Darvus.

This girl, who had the appearance of a thirteen-year-old and was actually only a few years older than me, had been the glue that held the team together. Caria was bright, cheery and sensitive of her surroundings, which served as great traits to keep Darvus and I from cutting each other’s throats. It was only after about a month or so that she confided in me that she had been helplessly in love with her perverted and lazy childhood friend. Needless to say, I was shocked at first, but I couldn’t help but empathize with her as a girl who had feelings for a boy that only saw her as a little girl that needed protecting.

Apart from her role as the mediator in our group, she truly shined in the battlefield. Even after fighting in battles for over three months, I’d yet to see anyone as agile, nimble and flexible as Caria. Her weapon was an artifact that took the appearance of a pair of gloves. However, when activated, they transformed into gauntlets reaching all the way up to her shoulders.

Going inside an open stall that had been conjured at the edge of the stream, I stripped my filthy clothes, careful not to irritate the scratches and bruises I’d gotten from this

last battle. Dipping my body into the cold, flowing stream at the far end of the enclosed room, I hurriedly wiped myself with the cleansing herb I had brought. I had to constantly be moving to fight the brisk water. After washing myself and the clothes that I had fought in, I dried myself and changed into a fresh attire, keeping the towel wrapped around my head.

Arriving back to my camp, I huddled closely beside the fire, gingerly defrosting myself from the torturous shower. Darvus was nowhere to be found, most likely flirting with some of the female conjurers stationed to guard the main base. I could see Caria's butt sticking out from our tent as she rummaged through her belongings, leaving only Stannard and myself by the fire.

"You should wash up as well. You don't want your wounds to get infected," I advised, facing my back toward the fire so my body could be evenly roasted.

"Ugh, I swear, fighting mana beasts is less painful than taking a bath in that near-frozen stream," Stannard grimaced. "I guess I should, though. Let me finish up with this beast core first."

I nodded in reply. I watched the blonde-haired boy, concentrating as he chanted a spell while clutching firmly at a beast core we had extracted from one of the gnolls.

Stannard Berwick, the last member of our team, had left a very distinct impression after his assessment. Professor Gideon was actually the one that had introduced him to my grandfather. When the dainty-looking boy that appeared no older than Caria stepped down at the training field, all three of us had our concerns. He was a dark-yellow stage conjurer at the time, and had a dual affinity for fire and wind. This was good and all, but Stannard also had a deficiency in his mana core that prevented him from storing the usual amount of mana a yellow stage mage normally would've been able to.

At first, I thought that having Stannard in the backlines like the other "wand wavers," as Darvus called them, would've been better because his condition. However, Gideon guaranteed that the boy would be useful to have as a teammate on the frontline. As it turned out, Stannard was a very peculiar type of deviant. His unique ability allowed him to somehow store actual spells into beast cores. However, he was the only one who could activate this prepared spell, otherwise, we'd all be carrying bags of loaded beast cores.

Seeing Darvus approaching our camp, I called out to him. “The ever-so-sexy-and-suave Darvus from the Clarell Family couldn’t get a date tonight?”

“Haha, the sheltered elf princess is getting better at sarcasm,” he snorted. “And it’s not that I couldn’t but because there were no girls worthy of myself.”

“You know, you’re only hurting her by doing this,” I sighed, pointing to Caria, who was still inside the tent.

“Why would she care what I do with women?” Darvus asked, his brow raised in confusion.

I shook my head. “Never mind, you dolt.”

Caria came out of the tent at that moment with dried fruit and meat in her arms. “I finally found where I hid these!”

Darvus let out an eager gasp as he eyed the food. “Why would you hide these?”

“So that our ever-so-sexy-and-suave teammate doesn’t inhale it all at once,” Stannard chimed, putting down the beast core he had just finished.

“Not you too,” Darvus groaned.

As we all laughed, a familiar voice called out to me from behind. “Princess!”

Turning around I couldn’t help but smile at the unexpected surprise. “Helen?”

Chapter 131

Reunion

Seeing the familiar face of Helen Shard, leader of the Twin Horns that Art's father had once led, I excitedly waved at her and the rest of the Twin Horns behind her. "Hi Guys!"

I gave the leader of the Twin Horns a large hug before greeting the rest of her party.

"Guys, I'd like you to meet Helen Shard, Durden Walker, Jasmine Flamesworth, Adam Krensh and Angela Rose of the Twin Horns. I've told you about them before, right?" I pointed at my teammates, introducing them as well. "This here is Caria Rede, Darvus Clarell, and Stannard Berwick."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Madam." Darvus rushed over to shake hands with Angela, the Twin Horn's conjurer. "Darvus Clarell, fourth son of Darius Clarell, and I must say that you are a sight for these sore eyes of mine."

"Ugh, typical," Caria whispered. He goes straight to the one with the large..." She didn't finish her sentence as she merely cupped the space in front of her chest exaggeratingly.

I looked down at my own breasts. I had never really cared about my figure, but looking at the two boys practically drooling over Angela's womanly figure, I couldn't help but wonder if even Art preferred...

"How long have you been here, Princess?" Helen's voice snapped me back to reality.

"Huh? Oh, we've been here for about three months now, I think," I replied. "And please, just call me Tessia."

"Sorry. We've only met a few times and they were all brief so I thought it'd be rude," she chuckled.

"Did you just get here?" I asked, my eyes shifting toward the sight of both Stannard and Darvus trying to flirt with Angela.

"This afternoon. We were at The Wall for about four months before our party was sent

here to help out with the scouting,” she explained as I motioned for her to have a seat beside me around our crackling fire.

The Wall was what everyone called the stretch of forts built along the the Grand Mountains to make sure the battle didn’t reach the other side. While I knew that the Alacryan forces might be invading from the western coast, Grandpa told everyone, including myself, to explicitly keep it a secret until proper preparations had been made.

Fortunately, communications with the dwarves had been going well over these past few months and they’ve agreed to let the humans and elves take shelter in their underground kingdom if needed.

No one was hoping it would get to that stage, especially the elves, because the distance between the Kingdom of Darv and Kingdom of Elenoir made it so only teleportations could be used. For now, many of the tribes along the southern half of Elenoir had migrated across the Elshire Forest and Grand Mountains near the central cities of Sapin. For now, Grampa’s, as well as the rest of the Council’s, plan was to get as many civilians as possible out of the western coast and away from the Beast Glades.

“What is it like fighting along the Wall, Helen?” I asked, curious about where a lot of the main fighting occurred. “Have you actually fought against Alacryan mages?”

“Yes,” she answered grimly. “The Alacryan forces are strong. Out at the Wall, it’s not just the Alacryan soldiers that we have to fight against but the mana beasts that they somehow put under their control as well.”

“I see.” I looked at my sword, dissatisfied that the only fighting I’ve done ever since I had joined the war was against the mana beasts under the control of the Alacryan forces.

Noticing the look on my face, Helen added, “But the battles going on here are just as important, maybe even more—trust me. The more mana beasts we kill here, the less there are up at the surface. And if we find and kill a mutant, the Alacryan forces lose hundreds of puppets fighting for them.”

I nodded silently in reply. I knew that winning the fights down here were crucial to this war. The main task of the soldiers gathered here were to find the mutant in the depths of the dungeon. Mutants were mana beasts, mostly leaders of their own

dungeon, that were controlled by the Alacryans. They used the mutant to control the hundreds of mana beasts that served it. As long as these mutants existed, mana beasts of their species followed them, fighting alongside the Alacryan soldiers.

There were dozens of squads out there, deep inside various dungeons, trying to find and kill the mutants before they gathered enough mana beasts and advanced toward the Wall.

Usually, there wouldn't be this many soldiers inside one dungeon, but one of our scouts had found signs that a S class mana beast had been turned into a mutant.

"Anyway. Because the mutant hiding inside here is supposedly a S class mana beast, your grandfather had sent more mages here, which is why we're here," the large man named Durden chimed in, overhearing our conversation.

"Thank the heavens for that. And for dear grandfather for bringing such a fair angel into my arms," Darvus added, inching an arm across Angela's back.

Angela just giggled, regarding Darvus as a cute puppy, as Caria smacked Darvus upside the head and dragged him away where he could keep his hands to himself.

Stannard, who had been ridiculed by Angela when she cooed and pet his head like some pet, moved next to Durden, fiddling with his crossbow-like weapon with a scowl on his face.

"Tell me more about the fights happening in front of the Wall, Helen." I turned back to the leader of the Twin Horns.

"Look, Princess," Adam Krensh spat. "Fights that happen at the Wall aren't bedtime stories that your nanny reads to you inside your fancy canopy bed. It's war! People die—on both sides."

The spear wielder with a head of red hair that looked like the burning fire we were huddled around glared at me as if he was scolding a child. I was about to say something when Durden got in between us. "You can't take Adam's words to heart or we'd have all killed him more than once in his sleep."

Unknowingly, I was already standing up as Durden intervened. His words quelled my anger enough for me to sit back down, but I was still glaring at the lanky emberhead. Arthur had mentioned how Adam could be when he described the Twin Horns, but I

didn't realize how much of an understatement his words were.

"Adam, go set up our tents around one of the empty fire pits," Helen ordered with a surprising amount of authority in her voice that wasn't there when she was talking to me. "Angela, can you go help him out?"

With a cheery salute, she herded the grumbling Adam away from our camp, leaving only Helen, Durden and Jasmine—who had been silent since they had first arrived.

"Adam, despite how his words came out from that defective muscle he calls a tongue, only said that because he didn't want you to know," Helen sighed. "You think you're over here fighting beasts, but in actuality, the Alacryan soldiers are much more monstrous than any mana beasts here. At least the creatures you battle here fight for survival and instinct. They fight to kill, and to some extent, that's mercy."

"What do you mean by that?" Stannard asked, his face pruned away from the weapon he had been cleaning once again.

There was hesitation on Helen's face as she tried her best to sugarcoat whatever she was about to say until Jasmine had stepped up and explained for her.

"Information is the most important in a war," she said evenly. "Both sides, they're trying to get information out of each other. That means kidnapping... torturing."

We were all silent for a moment as even Darvus' usually aloof expression had hardened.

"Battles here are black and white—beasts are bad, you are good. When you're fighting other humans, elves and dwarves that can all talk, scream in pain and beg for mercy... things become more gray and it becomes hard to distinguish what is right and wrong," Jasmine continued, her face a stone mask despite the horrors she was describing.

The once lively atmosphere of a reunion had turned tense as I exchanged glances with my teammates.

Suddenly, a series of loud smashes made us all turn our heads toward one of the gated entrances that led deeper into the dungeon.

"Please, hurry let me in!" A muffled voice yelled from behind one of the doors. The sentry in charge of that entrance quickly verified the man's identity before unbolting

the door and hauling it open.

The entire cavern was deathly quiet as everyone stationed inside or resting after an excursion was standing up, their hands gripping their weapons and their gazes focused on the entrance.

As the two heavy doors slid apart, the man that had shouted from the other side fell through, laying unconscious.

“Does this happen often?” Helen asked, her bow ready in hand as her other hand was already at her quiver.

“No, it doesn’t,” I answered, my hand leaning on the pommel of my sword.

The sentry immediately pulled the scout inside before closing the doors.

“Get me a medic!” the sentry roared, hoisting the bloody scout on his shoulders. There weren’t any emitters stationed here since most were at the Wall, healing the wounded there. However, there were always a few people well-adept at medical treatment.

“Do you want to see what that’s all about?” Stannard glanced up at me.

“Do we have the clearance to go inside?” Helen asked, her neck stretched out to see.

“Being a princess is a kind of clearance, right?” Darvus shrugged, eager to know what had happened.

Letting out a sigh, I motioned them to follow. “Not everyone, though.”

Eventually, Helen and Stannard volunteered themselves to come with me. Arriving at the white canopy tent at the opposite wall of the entrances and closest to the exit back to the surface, two guards stopped us from going inside before recognizing who I was.

“P-Princess. What brings you here? Are you injured?” The slightly larger of the two armored guards asked, dipping his head to get a better look at me.

“No. I know the scout that just arrived and I’m worried about him. Do you mind letting us through?” I lied, giving him a solemn smile.

The two guards exchanged hesitant glances, but eventually they opened the

removable tarp that served as the entrance.

I'd expected a lot more noise to be going on inside, especially from the shocking entrance of the scout, but the tent was empty except for the medic inside, her assistant, the leader of our expedition and the scout—who was still unconscious in bed.

At our arrival inside, the assistant and the leader of the expedition, a rather barrel-chested augments named Drogo Lambert, stood up from their seats.

"Princess? What happened? Are you injured?" Drogo asked, worry, etched on his face. His face turned to Stannard, then Helen before his face lit up. "Helen Shard?"

"Nice seeing you, Drogo, or I guess I should call you leader, right?" Helen stepped up and shook hands with the bulking man, whose armor seemed to contain his muscles rather than protect them.

"Haha, please, you're more than fit to take my place and more," his smile faded as he regarded us in wonder. "So what brings you two here? Is everything okay?"

"Don't worry, Leader, everything's fine." I nodded.

"The princess here is probably curious about what news our little slumbering prince brought to us, right?" the medic, an elderly woman with a hunch and a naturally scowling face to match, confirmed.

"Haha, I can't hide anything from you, Elder Albreda." I scratched my head.

"Bah! Does this poor excuse of a treatment center look like a gossip wing to you?" she grumbled as she organized a shelf full of herbs and plants.

"Of course not," Helen chimed in. "But I was brought here with my team to help out in finding the S class beast that was turned to a mutant and send updates to my superiors back at the Wall periodically. I thought I'd find out fastest what was going on by talking to this guy." Helen pointed to the unconscious man lying in bed with her eyes.

"Right. You'd be right in thinking that, but unfortunately he hasn't woken up yet," Drogo sighed, looking over his shoulder to the scout sleeping peacefully.

Stannard carefully approached the man. "What happened to him?"

“Dehydration and massive fatigue. The lad isn’t injured but it seemed like he hasn’t had anything to eat or drink for a few days and by the state of his feet, I’d say he’s been running nonstop for who knows how long.” Elder Albreda lifted the sheets to reveal the scout’s bandaged feet, splotches of red already seeping through the gauze.

“I see,” Helen responded. “Drogo, can you let us know as soon as he gets up?”

“Sure.” The leader of this dungeon expedition nodded.

As we were about to leave the tent, however, a sharp gasp made us turn back around. The scout had gotten up with a series of dry coughs.

“H-How long have I been out?” the scout sputtered in between fits.

“Calm down, soldier. One of the sentries recognized you; your name is Sayer, right?” Drogo had his arm behind Sayer’s back, supporting the scout.

“Yes, Sir,” he answered before greedily gulping down the cup of water the assistant had just handed him.

“Well, Sayer, it’s been only about ten minutes or so since you’d come back. What happened? Where is the rest of your team?” our expedition leader questioned.

“Dead, Sir. I had stayed behind...” the scout named Sayer hesitated. “I had a disagreement with my teammates so I had stayed behind.”

“Disagreement?” Drogo repeated.

“I felt terrible for letting my teammates go deeper by themselves so I trailed behind them almost immediately after they had left!” Sayer added, guilt practically etched on his forehead. “But they’d unknowingly walked into an ambush of gnolls far deadlier than the ones up here, Sir.”

Everyone in the tent was silent as we processed Sayer’s words.

“There must’ve been hundreds of them, Sir. A-And there was this large door behind them. As though they were protecting whatever was on the other side!” the scout stammered, taking another large gulp of water before continuing.

“I think we found it, Sir. I think we found the mutant’s den!”

Chapter 132

Drawing Closer

STANNARD BERWICK'S POV:

My stomach lurched at the scout's foreboding words.

This is it, I thought. This was what we were down here for. After this was over, I would be able to go back home for a bit and sleep in a real bed, eat a seasoned meal cooked for taste, not for sustenance. Yet why was I so afraid?

"Leader, I was able to do it." The scout let out another pained breath. "I managed to set up the mass-teleportation gate near the entrance."

"You did good, Sayer." The leader, Dresh, squeezed the scout's arm before heading out of the tent.

"Come on, we should prepare as well," the woman named Helen Shard advised, following behind.

Tessia nodded firmly in response, motioning for me to follow. But I couldn't.

My legs felt like they were anchored to the ground, as if my very body protested against the fact that following them might just lead to my death.

"Stannard? You okay?" Our team's leader tilted her head, locking eyes with me as she lifted the tent flap.

"Yeah, I-I'm fine." I said this more to convince myself than anything else.

We arrived back at our team's campsite where Tessia relayed the scout's news.

"Finally!" Darvus groaned in relief. "I can take a hot bath after all of this is over."

"Can you at least try to say things a spoiled child wouldn't?" Caria shook her head as she headed over to her tent.

“What? Everyone’s thinking it anyway, right?” Darvus turned to me. “Tell her, Stannard. You’re just itching for a hot bath after this, right?”

“Uh, yeah. Sure,” I replied blankly as I sat down with my mana launcher in my hands.

“Something wrong, Stan?” Darvus asked, raising a brow.

Letting out an annoyed sigh, I replied, “No, I’m fine. I just want this to be over.”

It was pointless to say anything. Darvus, Caria and Tessia all were genius mages and combatants. They didn’t need to feel fear in situations like these. They wouldn’t understand.

“All right. Well, we’ll head to our camp and prepare as well. Samantha and Adam have no clue of what’s going on after all,” the short-haired leader of the Twin Horns announced as the rest of team trailed behind.

A few minutes after the Twin Horns had left, Dresh's voice echoed through the large cavern, alerting everyone of the scout’s message. Soon, the entire place was filled with a frenzy of movement as over a hundred soldiers scurried around to prepare themselves for the impending battle.

Beside me, Caria had already equipped her battle gear, which consisted of a light leather armor covering her vitals without hindering her mobility. She lay sprawled out beside me, stretching her limber body in ways that I would’ve normally deemed impossible if I hadn’t seen it for myself.

Darvus, sitting across from me by the fire, was juggling the smaller axes he used for throwing. The normally lax expression on the spoiled fourth son of the Clarell Family was gone, replaced by the calm and focused mask he normally had during a serious battle.

I turned to our leader, Tessia, who was actually the youngest on our team—losing to me in age by just a year—but was actually the most composed. She had already equipped herself for battle, adorning her toned and slim body in a light armor. Our leader wore a tight-fitting black leather wrap underneath a chainmail plate protecting her chest. An elegantly curved, metallic cover decorated with intricate designs of flowing branches rested on top of the shoulder of her dominant arm. Her wrist guards were of the same design as the single shoulder plate armor and the faults that protected her hips and thighs.

As Tessia tied her hair back, revealing the nape of her cream-colored neck, I couldn't help but avert my gaze. I could feel my face growing hot as the image of Tessia's elegant figure burned itself into my skull.

Get yourself together, Stannard. She's out of your league! Besides, she's in love with that Arthur guy. I shook my head as I tried to concentrate on counting the ammunition I had. We wouldn't leave for a few more hours, which gave me some time to load more beast cores with spells.

I had about twenty-five low-damage rounds, and about eight high-damage cores. After roughly calculating, I had come to the conclusion that about five more low-damage and two more high-damage rounds should suffice.

Looking up, I observed as the mages began preparing the connection between the teleportation gates so that we would be able to arrive right where the scout had placed the artifact. As the shimmering portal enlarged, I couldn't help but feel the weight of my body growing heavier by the second.

I had done well the past three months we'd been here. However, this was the real thing. I had fought mana beasts before all of this, but it would be the first time fighting against a mutant.

"Come on, Stannard. You should stretch too. It'll be bad if your body suddenly cramps up while we're in battle."

Caria's voice shook me out of my daze, her bright eyes looking down at me from beside the fire as she held out her hand.

A smile managed to escape my lips as I accepted her hand. "Go easy on me."

After about two hours, the gate was ready and teams were already heading toward the gate, eager to be the first ones to go through. I gripped tightly at the handle of my mana launcher to keep my hands from trembling.

"Let's go," Tessia finally announced. A newfound fire burned in her eyes, determination practically leaking out of her pores.

"Aye, captain," Darvus responded, a snarky grin on his face.

We approached the mass in front of the teleportation gate capable of transporting a

few dozen at once.

“Are you guys ready?” a familiar voice chimed in from the left.

“As ready as we’ll ever be,” Tessia responded, a confident smile on her face as she locked eyes with Helen and the rest of the Twin Horns.

“Vanguard teams, brace yourselves upon arrival. We’re not certain how many mana beasts will be there on the other side,” Dresh yelled beside the portal. The teams he had specifically chosen beforehand would be the ones to lead the charge, as teams like ours would be more towards the rear, fighting any stragglers until the main battle came.

“Charge!” Dresh roared, unsheathing this longsword and taking the lead. The mass that gathered in front of the teleportation gate began dwindling as teams charged in with weapons at the ready.

Tessia, who was in front of our team, looked back at us over her shoulder. “We’ll all get out of this alive and eat a nice, delicious meal. Agreed?”

“Agreed!” we all shouted in unison as we stepped through the glowing gate.

I let out a crazed yell as I stepped through the gate in time to see an augments from one of the teams ahead of us get hacked down by a pair of hyena-faced gnolls.

“Grannith!” a woman beside him desperately cried out before the same pair of gnolls jumped on her.

As I quickly loaded my weapon with a low-damage core, Darvus had already sprung into action. With a powerful leap, he had cleared the distance and arrived above the gnolls that assaulted the female conjurer that had cried out for her dead comrade.

Unclipping his two short axes from his back, he brandished his weapons in the air. The air around him swirled, coalescing into his two axes as he let out a fierce battle cry.

Instantly, the two gnolls’ heads were severed clean. Blood had only splurged from the base of their necks a second after as he checked on the state of the conjurer.

“Damn it!” he swore, sending one of the decapitated bodies tumbling off with a firm kick. “She’s already dead.”

“Come on, don’t stay in one place too long. Stick together, but we need to move around,” Tessia ordered as she looked around us.

It seemed like a fair-sized group of gnolls and orcs had been waiting for us, because the few teams that preceded us were all locked in battle with mana beasts.

We were in a cavern about half the size of the main encampment. For a second, I thought we had arrived in front of the towering doors that the scout had speculated was the place where the mutant was, but peering ahead, there was only a narrow entrance to a hallway darkened by shadows.

“Stannard, to your left!” Caria’s voice called from behind.

Immediately, I whirled around, taking a step back just in time to dodge a crude head of a halberd. Raising my mana launcher in line with the orc’s chest, I fired off a low-damage beast core, burning a hole into the center of the beast’s heart.

The monster crumbled to the floor, dropping its weapon with a heavy thud. I had no time to rest as another gnoll hastily approached.

“Got it,” Caria called out mid-dash. She bolted close to the ground like a speeding cannon as both her fists were tucked closely to her chest, ready to fire.

“Hahp!” Caria exploded up at breakneck speed with the help of a small earthen platform she had raised to accelerate herself. She brought her arms over her head, as if she wanted to dive straight into the approaching gnoll—her fingers pointed like the tip of a spear.

With a resounding thud, Caria’s gauntlet pierced through the stomach of the gnoll that had been about twice her size. As the giant dog-faced monster faltered, its grotesque face crinkled in shock, I delivered the final blow with another low-damage core.

Landing deftly on her feet, Caria regained her balance, shaking the blood off of her metal gauntlets before bolting off into another direction.

An agonizing growl behind me caught my attention. Turning around, I got a glimpse of Tessia taking down a pair of orcs and a large gnoll. She was a flurry of blades as she zipped from beast to beast. Each step, each swing, had a purpose as she slashed and lunged at gnolls as if in a choreographed dance.

Every time I saw her fight, I couldn't help but grow amazed. I had always been jealous of Darvus and Caria for their innate talents in mana manipulation and fighting prowess, but Tessia's skill and grace was at a level where one could only revere.

"It's about time you made yourself useful, right Stannard?" Darvus called out as he pried out a hatchet from the skull of a dead orc.

"Shut it!" I retorted with a smile. "How about we start mobbing them up?"

I took out a large beast core that radiated an orange-red glow.

"Conjurer cross-fire!" Darvus yelled out in warning to the other soldiers that would be in range as he began herding a group of orcs.

The rest of the soldiers knew what to do as some began backing out of the way while others veered their opponents toward my line of fire.

A rather large conjurer approached me and gave a meaningful nod as he raised his staff in preparation as well. Soon, a few more conjurers joined while we all readied our attacks as more and more orcs and gnolls got herded toward the center of the dim cavern.

The few strays that had managed to break away from the group were quickly hacked down by the augmenters protecting us.

Taking a deep breath, I loaded the glowing beast core into my mana launcher. Steadying the tip of my weapon at the center of the mass of gnolls and orcs guarding their cavern, I waited for the signal.

A deep, baritone voice called out from the edge of the group as a soldier hacked and pushed a stray gnoll into the cluster of beasts that had been herded. "All clear!"

The conjurers positioned around me all fired off their most powerful spells at the mass as I waited calmly for the right timing. Just as the last spell shot out at the monsters, I launched my spell.

[Hell's Prison]

The recoil from firing the sphere of fire three times my size sent me tumbling back into the cavern wall. The burning orb of fire grew in size as it advanced towards the

group of orcs trying to escape, but they couldn't make it in time as the blaze encompassed them and the spells that the conjurers had cast.

The flaming sphere diminished to reveal the charred remains of the few dozen mana beasts that had been trapped within, sending out a wave of cheers from the rest of the soldiers. The few scattered mana beasts were easily dealt with by the augmenters, giving me a few minutes to breathe.

"Good job, you peculiar little mage." Darvus winked at me as he helped me back on my feet. There had been around twice as many mana beasts as there were soldiers, but by the end of the battle, we had incurred less than ten deaths.

"This was an overwhelming triumph, despite the surprise attack that the army of mana beasts laid down on us," Dresh's firm and commanding voice echoed throughout the cavern. "Let's not let our comrades' deaths be in vain and continue forth!"

A fervent cheer resounded from the soldiers, including Darvus and Caria. Tess merely cleaned her blade and sheathed it back with a solemn face. Her hollow turquoise eyes followed an elf being carried back through the portal we had come through, staring intently at the jagged spear protruding out of the lifeless elf's back.

I didn't know whether Tessia had known that elf, but I couldn't help but empathize with her.

Was this truly a victory if, to some people, the weight of those ten deaths mean so much more than a simple number count?

Chapter 133

Beyond The Door

From the tense and gloomy air within the cavern, it was obvious that this battle had caught all of us by surprise. We were usually all capable in battle, but these past few months of repetitive excursions—hoping to find any signs that a mutant might be close—had left us dull and sloppy.

A few teams had already regrouped and were taking a rest while the injured and deceased were sent back to be properly cared for. Some of the more restless augmenters were sharpening their blades while conjurers sat still in meditation to be in top shape for whatever lay ahead of us.

As our young leader continued surveying the battlegrounds like a zombie, I finally called out for her to join us.

“What’s wrong?” I questioned. “Are you okay, Tessia?”

Her face turned to us as she revealed a faint, and obviously forced, smile. “It’s nothing. It’s good that we won... but we still ended up letting almost ten soldiers die.”

“Our ever-so-compassionate princess exuding kindness and grace to us peasants!” Darvus cried out. “We are not worthy!”

“Zip it,” Tessia quipped, her voice coming out a lot softer than usual.

“We did our best,” Caria consoled, gently patting her back.

“She’s right, Tessia. It’s impossible to save them all,” I added. However, rather than comforting her, it seemed to have the opposite effect, as her expression dropped.

“I guess you’re right. I can’t save them all,” she repeated glumly.

“Nice going,” Darvus whispered beside me.

“Hey! It was better than your sarcastic remark,” I retorted in a hushed voice.

“At this rate, I’ll only bring him down,” Tessia continued, almost too quiet for us to hear.

“By him, do you mean that guy you’re always talking about? Arthur, was it?” Caria chimed, leaning in, eager to hear about the boy Tessia depicted as some fantastical hero out of a children’s book.

“Ugh, not him again,” Darvus groaned. “Princess, when are you going to snap out of that delusion of yours?”

Tessia calmly shook her head. “It’s not like that.”

“What do you mean?” Darvus continued. “You describe him as if he’s some all-powerful, charismatic hotshot without a single humanly flaw.”

“Oh please. You’re just jealous because Arthur is everything you wish you could be, plus better-looking,” Caria accused. She then turned back to Tessia, eyes twinkling. “Is he really that handsome and charming?”

“I guess,” Tessia giggled. “He was pretty popular in school, although I doubted he knew that.”

“I’m hating the guy more and more,” Darvus grumbled.

Tessia shook her head. “He isn’t without flaws, though. Honestly, Arthur was kind of scary when I first met him.”

“You said he saved you from the slave traders after you ran away from home, right?” Caria confirmed.

“Y-Yeah.” Tessia’s face reddened at the embarrassing memory. “He did save me, though I felt like it wasn’t really out of the goodness of his heart, but some logical scheme. Of course, I was only a child back then so I could be wrong, but Arthur had always had this scary side of him where he seemed cold—heartless, even.”

“Ooh, a bad boy,” Caria cooed.

“I’m going to barf,” Darvus gagged. “If you ask me, he doesn’t seem like that great of a guy. I mean, he left you alone in danger a few times, right? And he went off on his own after you got kidnapped by that Alacryan mage that invaded Xyrus Academy! He didn’t even make sure you were okay and went off to who knows where.”

“He checked in with Grandpa to make sure I was okay, but he was in a hurry,” Tessia reasoned, her head lowering.

“Oh right, to go ‘train’ somewhere in secret.” Darvus rolled his eyes. “If you ask me, he just ran away from the war because he was afraid he would die.”

I took a peek at Tessia’s expression, afraid that she would be mad, but our leader was calm. “You’re wrong, Darvus. Arthur may be a bit clueless when it comes to expressing or even handling emotions, and a bit naive in some other aspects”—Tessia’s cheeks blushed ever-so-slightly—“but he’s not one to run away in fear; his desire to protect his loved ones is too strong for that.”

“Yes, yes. Arthur will be the hero that saves us from the wrath of the Alacryans,” Darvus sighed, conceding from Tessia’s determined gaze.

“He can’t be that strong though, right?” I asked. I had grown more and more curious about the boy Tessia cherished to such a degree.

Our leader’s lips curled into a smirk as she gazed afar. “He’s strong.”

“Well, I can’t wait to meet him!” Caria added. “You will introduce us to him, right?”

“Yeah.” Tessia’s smile dimmed. “Hopefully that time comes soon.”

Darvus shook his head, hugging himself. “Blech. You can count me out! I feel like I already know the guy way too much. Besides, after fighting alongside me for so long, I bet the guy will only look like some second-rate mage.”

“Is there a limit to how pretentious you can be?” Caria shook her head, eliciting a chuckle from me.

We got up after noticing that the rest of the teams had gotten reorganized. After Drogo finished counting the heads of the team leaders, we departed through the dark corridor on the far end of the cavern.

As the teams began marching into the narrow hallway, they were swallowed up by the shadows. Our team went in next, and it was shocking how the atmosphere changed so drastically once we stepped foot. The air was dry, still, and somewhat sour as the only sound that echoed along these walls was the sound of footsteps.

I was barely able to discern the figures of the soldiers ahead of us, the tiny light from someone in the front bobbing in the distance. I looked back in confusion; the light from the cavern we had just come from seemed to retract from the hallway.

“This is some spooky crap,” Darvus’s hushed voice echoed from behind.

“Tell me about it,” I said. Some of the other conjurers ahead of us tried to illuminate the hallway with a spell, but whatever orb of light they conjured were soon eaten away by the darkness.

“It looks like only the illuminating artifact up in the front works in this place,” Caria said from my side.

Tessia, who was ahead of us by a few steps continued walking, unaffected by the unnatural absence of light.

As we continued walking, the light from the cavern we had come from dwindled into a speck. Everyone walked in silence or hushed whispers, paying attention to our footing and the bobbing orb of light guiding our way.

It felt like we had marched for hours when another speck of light came to view. The orange light from the illuminating artifact stopped as Drogo spoke once more.

Our expedition leader spoke in a low voice, afraid that the mana beast would pick up on our conversation despite how far away we were. “We’ll soon arrive where Sayer, our scout, and his team had arrived before his team was ambushed by mana beasts. From what he had witnessed, we are to expect at least a few hundred gnolls and orcs, some larger than the ones we had faced up until now. Prepare your bodies and hearts, and may the ones watching over us be with you.”

We broke into a steady jog, the white light growing larger as we advanced through the dark corridor. Luckily, the ground was pretty even; if anyone ahead of us tripped, it would undoubtedly create a domino reaction.

The speed of the bobbing orange light ahead of us grew faster as we began picking up the pace until, finally, the illuminating light was almost upon us.

After being in almost total darkness, my eyes had to adjust as I stepped out of the corridor. I brandished my mana launcher, ready to blow apart anything that came my way.

However, my anticipation for a battle had gone to waste as all that lay before us were bodies sprawled on the ground and an eerie stillness.

Hundreds of orc and gnoll bodies lay scattered, massacred by the hundreds. I had to look at my feet to keep myself from accidentally stepping on a severed limb or body of a dead beast as I tried to deduce what had happened here.

I looked around, somewhat comforted by the fact that everyone else was just as confused as I was.

“What in the world?” Drogo’s head wouldn’t stop turning as he scoured the cavern, his hands gripping his longsword.

“I’m not sure whether to be relieved or scared at this,” Darvus said, his brow furrowed in suspicion.

“To the door!” Drogo commanded, snapping out of his daze.

All heads turned to face the towering doors at the other end of the circular cavern. The only impressive thing about the double doors were their towering size. The metal that covered them was thick and covered with dents and scratches, making it seem ancient and threatening.

As we all headed towards what we presumed was the den of the mutant, the tension began to rise. No one spoke as we all stood around the large doors that each spanned over five meters in width. The hundred or so that were left of us took position in a semicircle around the doors, all braced to attack or defend, as ten augmenters positioned themselves to haul the entrance open.

“The door,” one of the men voiced. “It’s not fully closed.”

Everyone looked at one another, perplexed by the strange chain of events, but Drogo snapped everyone to attention with a firm stomp.

“Open it!” he ordered, lowering his stance to combat whatever lied in store on the other side.

The harsh screech of the metal doors against the stone ground echoed until they had been completely pried apart.

For a brief moment, not a single word was spoken as the entirety of the soldiers ready to fight for their lives stood frozen, jaws slack.

Atop a hill of corpses that loomed high above us sat a lone man. His arms rested on the hilt of a thin, teal sword that shined dimly beneath a layer of blood that had come from the body of the orc it had been embedded in. Scattered beneath this mountain of carcasses were more bodies of orcs and gnoll, some frozen, some burned, others simply bisected.

At first glance, the pile of corpses that the man was resting over seemed to blend together into indiscernible remains of mana beasts, but looking closer, there was a figure near the top that stood out amongst the others. With the head of a giant lion and the body of a scaled monster, it lay sprawled in a bloodied mess. Its gray body was lifeless as the unnaturally black horns that sprouted out of its head had been shattered.

There was no doubt about it. That was the S class mutant we had ventured all this way for, that we had laid down our lives for—except it was already dead.

I focused my gaze back at the man, sitting tiredly atop a throne of corpses, when he finally lifted his head.

The man wasn't even staring directly at me, yet I could feel his domineering pressure weigh down on my very soul. Every fiber in my body screamed at me to run away as far as possible from this man. My sense of fear became magnified as the man's azure eyes gleamed balefully from above.

This wasn't anything like the diminutive fear I had felt back at the tent; no, this was true dread.

I knew—and most likely everyone in here knew as well—that advantage in numbers didn't apply to someone like him.

From my side, I spotted a figure stepping forward. I almost lashed out in fear for the person's life when I realized it was Tessia. Suddenly, the dread that had overcome me grew stronger as I hopelessly stood, frozen from the unbreakable shackles of terror, as Tessia took another step forward.

Time itself seemed to slow as our leader dropped the thin blade in her hand. A single tear rolled down Tessia's cheek as her face contorted into a mix of different emotions.

She uttered a single word that left me more overwhelmed than the man sitting on top of the mountain of corpses. “Art?”

Chapter 134

His Return

Tessia took another step forward, less hesitant this time. “A-Arthur? Is that you?” she muttered once more, her voice getting caught in her throat.

Every one of the soldiers, augmenters and conjurers alike, had their heads turned to face our leader as she approached the man sitting atop the hill of corpses, as if in a trance.

Suddenly, the silence that had filled the cavern was broken by a bright chirp. Seeming to come out of nowhere, a streak of white shot out towards Tessia and landed in her arms.

It looked like some sort of miniature white fox.

“Sylvie!” Tessia, exclaimed, embracing the creature before looking back up.

“Y-You! State your name!” Dresh was the one to speak, his usually confident voice wavering at the sight before him.

The blue-eyed man regarded him in silence for a moment, making Dresh instinctively take a step back, before he answered. “Arthur Leywin.”

Prying his bloodied sword out of the corpse it was embedded into, he deftly leaped down the large mound of bodies, landing in front of the large doorway.

As he stepped out of the shadows, I could finally make out his full appearance that had been shrouded in darkness.

He appeared pretty young despite the aura that emanated from him. Tousled, shoulder-length auburn hair contrasted his bright eyes that seemed composed—casual, almost—even in this situation. The splatters of blood and grime that darkened his face and clothes did nothing to diminish his looks.

This man wasn’t glamorous. Nothing like the noblemen I’d seen, who carried

themselves with chests puffed out and nose pointed so high up that they might as well have been looking at the sky. No, behind his nonchalant gaze and slightly curled lips was an air of sovereignty that transcended any of those peacock nobles fluttering their power like colorful plumage.”

Sheathing his teal sword into an unadorned black scabbard, he took a step toward us with his hands held up. “I’m on your side,” he said wearily.

The soldiers present all exchanged uncertain glances at one another as Tessia took another step forward.

“Arthur?” several members of the Twin Horns exclaimed as they all ran up to them.

However, Tessia remained where she was. I saw them lock eyes for a brief moment and I thought I even saw a faint smile from Arthur, but neither of them approached each other.

Tessia’s actions caught me off guard, but the way the Twin Horns acted with the guy named Arthur seemed to dissipate the tension and suspicion that had filled the cavern. However, this only brought on more questions in my head.

Assuming that really was the Arthur Leywin our leader had told us so much about, what was he doing here? How did he get here? Did he kill the S class mutant by himself?

I turned my head to Darvus and, by his furrowed brows and perplexed gaze, it seemed like he was also curious about the same things. Caria, on the other hand, had a goofy smile plastered on her face as she ogled the man surrounded by the Twin Horns—ignoring the fact that there was a giant pile of bloody and stinking corpses just behind them.

“While I hate to interrupt your reunion, there are more pressing matters at hand,” Dresh spoke aloud. “What exactly happened here? I had not been informed that anyone by the name of ‘Arthur’ would join us down here in this dungeon.”

“I’m sure no one had been informed since I arrived less than an hour ago,” Arthur replied, stepping out from the crowd of his friends that had surrounded him. “Even I was surprised to be greeted by so many mana beasts.”

“A-Are you saying that you, single-handedly, killed all of those mana beasts—including

the S class mutant—behind you?” a soldier stammered.

“Do you see anyone else in there alive besides me?” Arthur tilted his head.

“That’s impossible!” another soldier yelled out. “How can a mere boy do what a whole battalion of mages had set out to do by himself?”

Arthur simply raised a brow, unaffected by the remark. “It really doesn’t matter whether you believe me or not. The fact is, the mutant that you guys were ordered to kill is now dead.”

More and more soldiers began asking questions and spouting accusations, but all were ignored by the mysterious man. He simply walked over to Dresh and extended a hand. “You seem like the leader of this expedition. Do you mind letting me stay at your camp tonight? I’m rather spent and would like a decent night’s rest before heading out.”

Dumbfounded, Dresh accepted his handshake and nodded wordlessly.

“What about all the beast cores?” a bearded conjurer blurted out, pointing at the mountain of mana beasts.

Everyone, once again, exchanged glances with one another in hopes that they would somehow find answers within someone’s eyes. Usually, the beast cores that were collected after a battle were split amongst the soldiers. Looking at the sheer number of corpses that had been stacked atop one another in that large hill of bodies, even the most humble man would drool at the potential to be gained.

“They’re all gone,” Arthur answered quietly. “Sorry, but my bond has quite a large appetite for beast cores,” he continued, pointing to the furry white fox still cleaning itself.

“Are you saying that that little thing just devoured hundreds of beast cores?” a burly augments retorted in disbelief as his hand gripped tightly at the handle of his sword.

“Yes,” he responded matter-of-factly.

“What about the S class mutant’s beast core? What happened to that?” Dresh asked, regaining his composure.

“I have it.” Arthur let out a sigh. “Any more questions? I’ll be happy to debrief later, but

standing around answering everyone's questions isn't exactly the best use of our times."

"We'll escort him back to base, Leader," Tessia spoke up as the members of the Twin Horns all nodded in agreement.

"Very well. For now, I want a few teams to stay behind to look for any stragglers and collect anything worth selling. The rest, we'll go back to camp and wait for further instructions," Dresh ordered, placating the dissatisfied soldiers.

The trip back to the main camp was almost as tense and stifling as it had been when we had first opened the dungeon doors. Caria, Darvus and I all kept silent as the sour mood of almost every soldier present weighed down on our shoulders. Even Tessia and the Twin Horns kept their conversations with Arthur down to hushed, indiscernible whispers.

Behind me, I could hear the conversations of soldiers, some glad that there was no battle, others disappointed at the fact that they would leave with no beast cores or other bounties. and some downright angry for not being able to battle a strong mana beast. However, despite the mixed feelings everyone had of the guy's appearance, we all shared one emotion: fear.

Upon arriving back to the main camp, the guy named Arthur headed straight for the bathing stalls by the stream while Tessia and the Twin Horns followed Dresh into his personal tent.

"Well that was anticlimactic," Darvus sighed, slumping down next to the smoldering remains of our campfire.

"I'd say that it was pretty eventful," Caria countered. "Did you see that pile of mana beasts? And that giant mutant? I doubt that even with all of us combined, we'd come out from a fight like that unscathed."

"Exactly!" Darvus exclaimed. "That guy, Arthur... How the hell was he able to kill them all—if he really did kill them in the first place?"

I shook my head. "What, you think the guy was sitting there, posing, waiting for us to show up to take the credit?"

"W-Well, I'm not sure about that, but I mean... it's not natural. Tessia said he was

around her age, which means he's a bit younger than us. What kind of fiery pit did he have to grow up in to become a monster like that?" Darvus let out a sigh, looking down at the two axes he had been fumbling with in his hands. "If he really was able to singlehandedly kill all mana beasts along with that S class mutant, what are guys like us needed for?"

"Do I smell a hint of jealousy?" Caria smirked, lightly prodding Darvus with her elbow.

"You meant to say envy, Caria," I corrected on impulse.

She turned to me. "What's the difference?"

"Jealousy is what you feel when you worry someone will take something you possess. Envy is longing after something someone else has." I shook my head. "You know what? Never mind; it's not important."

Caria just shrugged and placed a hand on her childhood friend's shoulder. "Anyways, he's just one person, Darvus. No matter how strong he is, it's not like he can win the war by himself. You saw the state he was in. He wasn't really hurt but he seemed pretty worn out!"

Darvus rolled his eyes. "Thanks. At least he was tired after wiping out an army of mana beasts and an S class mutant by himself."

"No need to get snarky with me, Darvus. I'm just trying to help," Caria clipped, her cheeks turning red.

"Well, don't! I don't need your pity. Besides, that guy isn't natural. No point in comparing myself to a freak of nature like him."

"I don't know, he seems pretty normal to me," I chimed in. "Putting his strength aside, he seemed like a decent person while he was talking to the Twin Horns."

"Yeah, I even spotted a smile from him when he saw Tessia!" Caria added, her lips curling up as well at the thought. "Although I was expecting something more, like a passionate hug or something."

"Please, you saw the way he talked to everyone. He was a snobby jerk," Darvus continued, shaking his head.

“Well everyone was kind of a jerk to him,” I countered. I didn’t know why I was defending the guy, but it was times like these that Darvus really rubbed me the wrong way. Whenever a situation didn’t go his way, he always pointed fingers and made assumptions to feel better about himself.

Darvus’s eyes narrowed. “Why are you taking his side?”

“I’m not strictly taking his side”—I shook my head—“I just think it’s naive to base our impressions on the guy without even holding a conversation with him. You’ve heard how Tessia always talked about Arthur. Don’t you think we should give him the benefit of the doubt?”

“Tessia’s mind is probably clouded by her past memories of the guy,” Darvus scoffed. “You saw the tension between the two. Hey, maybe you finally have a shot with her.”

I couldn’t take it anymore. “Are you that petty? You sound like a child, bringing me into this. You’re drawing conclusions on this guy based on what, exactly?”

“G-Guys, let’s not fight,” Caria voiced, her eyes shifting from me to Darvus.

“I’m basing it off my instinct, twerp!” Darvus hissed, standing up. “Maybe that’s something you can’t do because of your deformed mana core.”

I could feel blood rushing to my head at that insult.

“Well, at least I don’t need to convince myself and everyone else that someone better than me can only be a monster just to keep his worthless pride intact!” I spat out.

Darvus’ face burned red as well as he shook in rage. Throwing the hatchet he had been white-knuckling down at the ground in front of him, whipped around and stomped to our tent and slipped inside.

“Stannard...” Caria came over to me after watching her best friend go. “Y-You know he didn’t mean that, right? Come on, you know how he gets when he’s all riled up.”

Letting out a sigh, I mustered up a faint smile toward the girl who was just a bit taller than me. “I’m fine. It’s not like it’s the first time we’ve had one of these fights. I don’t butt heads as often as Tessia does with him but that’s mainly because I just hold it in. It’s when I can’t endure it that I explode and something like this happens.”

“You’re right, though,” Caria replied after a moment of silence. “Darvus is much better than he was back then, but being the prodigious son of noble blood, he was handed everything: wealth, resources, attention, and even talent.”

“A whole lot of good that does him if he’s still an ass.” I rolled my eyes. “Look, Caria, I’m not mad at you, and I’m not even mad at what Darvus said to me. I’m just tired of his narcissistic ego that pops up no matter how much you try to shove it down.”

Caria let out a small giggle. “Tell me about it. I’ve known him more than twelve years and I bet rabid mana beasts could mature much faster than Darvus. But ever since he’s met Tessia and you, he’s gotten a lot better. That’s a fact.”

“Yeah, I know.” I nodded, already looking for a way to break the ice with my egocentric teammate.

Caria and I talked for a while longer as we sat around the fire we lit up once more. As two shadowed figures approached, we stood up.

“Hey guys,” Tessia’s voice rang. As the two got closer, I could make out our leader and the guy next to her.

“I’d like you to meet my childhood friend, Arthur,” she said, putting a hand on the man next to her. When I stood up and approached them, I couldn’t help but notice that our leader’s eyes were a bit red.

His hair still damp from his bath, Arthur dipped his head. “Stannard Berwick and Caria Rede, right? Nice to meet you guys, and thank you for taking care of my friend. I know she can be quite a handful.”

This got out a giggle from Caria as Tessia jabbed an elbow to his ribs. Seeing the two like this made me doubt the feeling I had when I first saw the guy. Without the blood covering most of his face, it was safe to say Arthur was indeed the enemy of all single males. His features were sharp, but not overly so, with a subtle charm that went beyond just the textbook standard of handsome. His reddish-brown hair was a tad long, as if he hadn’t gotten a proper trim in years, but it only served to hide his looks—not dampen them.

He was a head taller than Tessia, which made him quite tall for his age since our leader was just a few centimeters shorter than Darvus. Even underneath the loose-fitting robe he wore, I could tell his physique was that of a fighter. The way Arthur carried

himself, the way he walked over here, and the way his eyes seemed to gaze over everything around him indeed confirmed that the aura he exuded wasn't just my imagination.

As Tessia and Arthur were about to take a seat around our fire, Darvus stormed out of his tent. When he passed by me, he shot me the look of embarrassment he always had when he was about to apologize, but I stopped him with a hand. Revealing a snide smirk, I mouthed, "It's fine, twerp."

Darvus scratched his head as he flashed a wry smile. However, his gaze turned rigid as he faced Arthur. Tessia, Caria and I all looked at him, worried at what he might say when Darvus lifted a finger and said loudly. "Arthur Leywin. I, Darvus Clarell, fourth son of the Clarell House, formally challenge you to a duel!"

Chapter 135

A Warrior's Maiden Heart

TESSIA ERALITH'S POV:

The image of Arthur on top of that mountain of corpses, drenched in blood, looking down at us with a cold glare, had been burned into my head for hours now. I recognized him almost immediately, but my voice got caught in my throat. I couldn't call out to him; I was scared to.

Even after gathering the courage to finally say his name, he stayed silent. The fear that something had changed in him during his training immediately came to mind as he faced us. When Sylvie popped out, I was happy, but even when Arthur finally spoke, I couldn't get rid of the unease in my chest.

The sight of him stepping into the light made my heart feel like it had twisted into a knot. He was filthy and his eyes practically screamed exhaustion, but it really was Arthur. I wanted to embrace him right there, just as the Twin Horns were doing, but something in me kept me from doing so. Looking at my childhood friend, I sensed a clear distance that went beyond the few meters that separated us. And so I stood still, anchored, as I gave him a hesitant smile that didn't even reach my eyes.

He smiled back, but it was only for a moment as the soldiers immediately began questioning him.

Throughout the trip back to the main camp, Arthur stayed relatively silent despite the chatter of the Twin Horns around us. They were all excited to have him back, despite the obvious discontent among the soldiers. Arthur smiled when spoken to, and he responded with minimal words, but that was it. Immediately after arrival, he spotted the stream and went to wash up with Sylvie. I went straight to the main tent with Dresh and the Twin Horns to try and help appease the tension our leader, along with the rest of the soldiers, felt towards my childhood friend.

Arthur came to the main tent after he had washed up, but even without the blood and filth covering him, he was just as unapproachable. He debriefed what was necessary, otherwise stating that the information was to be told directly to my grandfather. I

stayed silent throughout the short meeting as Dresh and the Twin Horns bombarded him with questions.

Dresh left first to inform the rest of the soldiers of their next course of action. The Twin Horns reluctantly agreed to let Arthur rest only after being promised of a more detailed account later.

With only Arthur and me left in the tent, I remained tense, staring at my feet as I could feel Arthur's gaze boring into me. I didn't know what to say, how to act, or even how to feel. With Arthur suddenly appearing in front of me after more than two years, and him acting so... distant, I was at a loss. Whatever confidence I had left to approach my childhood friend went out the window as I looked at my pitiful state. Here I was, dressed like a man, layered from head to toe with grime and soot. Worst of all, my hair was a bird's nest and I smelled like week-old garbage.

I could see him walking up to me, each of his footfalls making my heart beat just a little bit faster. However, I refused to look up. As he came closer, I could smell the faint aroma of herbs coming from him. Don't come closer, I prayed, scared that he'd be repulsed by my stench.

His feet stopped just in front of mine but my eyes stayed glued to my feet as I squirmed awkwardly. For a moment, we were both silent. The only sound I could hear was the beating of my uncooperative heart.

"It's been a while, Tess," Arthur finally said. "I missed you."

At those few words, the ice that had stiffened my body melted. My vision became blurry as I refused to stare anywhere else but at my feet.

I clenched my fists to keep myself from shaking. My eyes betrayed me as I could see the drops of tears darkening the leather of my boots.

Art's warm hand gently touched my arm and I couldn't help but notice how large it was. I had known him since he was shorter than me, but now, the simple touch of his palm filled me with a sense of protection. I tried my utmost to stay firm, but I found myself sniffing uncontrollably as my body began quivering.

I didn't exactly know what came over me to reduce me to such a state. Maybe it was finally seeing my childhood friend again. Maybe it was because his words just now confirmed that it was still truly him, not the cold killer that I thought he had turned

into when I first saw him. It might possibly not have had anything to do with that at all; I couldn't exactly explain the reason why every barrier I had unconsciously raised to endure these last two years had just come crumbling down. All I felt was this wave of relief that everything was okay now, that I didn't have to worry anymore. All of a sudden, it felt like everything Grandpa, Master Aldir and everyone else had been worrying about would turn out okay now that Art was here.

It was funny how a person could do that—how one person could make you feel truly... safe.

"Art... you... idiot!" I hiccuped in between snuffles. I raised my fists to hit him, but by the time they reached his chest, there was no strength behind them.

I must've shouted every profanity I knew at him, blaming him for just about everything: his cold attitude, his tastelessly long hair that made him look scary, his lack of contact until now—down to how it was his fault I was in my current state. Art just stood there, silently taking it all as his large hand continued to warm my arm.

I was angry, I was frustrated, I was embarrassed, but I was relieved. That whole mix of emotions turned me into a lump of tears as I continued assaulting Art—mostly because I hated myself for how I was acting right now.

After crying out all that I could, I rested my head against his chest, staring down at his feet that had also been spotted with my tears, letting out hiccups and snuffles.

It was quiet for a minute and I finally worked up the courage to look at his face, only to see him staring right back at me.

I was about to whip my head away when his smile stopped me. It wasn't like the smile he had when we saw each other at the entrance of the mutant's lair. His eyes crinkled into two crescent moons as a warming sincerity tugged at the corners of his lips to create a gleaming smile.

"You're still a crybaby, aren't you?" he joked, removing the hand he had on my arm to wipe a stray tear that refused to drop to the ground.

"Shuddup," I replied, my voice coming out nasally.

Letting out a soft chuckle, he motioned with his head to follow him. "Come on. Your friends must be waiting."

I gave him a nod, picking up Sylvie, who had been asleep on the ground. As we walked, my gaze constantly shifted between the sleeping Sylvie to Art.

“You got taller,” I remarked, my eyes now focused on Sylvie.

“Sorry I can’t say the same for you,” Art teased, weariness evident in his eyes as he let out a faint smile.

“I’m tall enough.” I stuck out my tongue.

Spotting Caria and Stannard talking around our fire, we picked up our pace as I tried my best to hide all signs that I had been crying.

After introducing Art to the both of them, we situated ourselves around the fire when Darvus suddenly came stomping out with a determined expression.

“Arthur Leywin. I, Darvus Clarell, fourth son of the Clarell House, formally challenge you to a duel!” he announced without any particular anger or spite; instead, he looked resolute.

“What?” the rest of us, aside from Art, exclaimed in unison.

My gaze immediately landed on Art to see how he would react. With him being physically and mentally drained from these past few hours, I didn’t know how he would take such a confrontation. However, to my relief, I spotted an amused expression on my childhood friend.

“Nice to meet you, Darvus Clarell, fourth son of the Clarell House. May I ask for the reason of this duel?” Art replied without getting up.

Caria immediately got up and held back Darvus. “D-Don’t mind him, Mr. Leywin—”

“Please, just call me Arthur.”

“—Arthur,” she amended. “He’s just being foolish.”

“I’m fine, Caria. I’m not mad or anything.” Darvus shook his childhood friend away before facing Art again. It was a weird sight seeing Darvus speak to Art in such a formal and respectful manner since Darvus was a few years older than Art.

“As for my reason,”—Darvus paused—“with all excuses aside—a man’s pride.”

I was utterly baffled by his response, and looking at the stunned expressions on Caria’s and Stannard’s faces, so were the two of them.

However, Art stifled back a laugh as he covered his mouth. His shoulders shook as he tried to hold it in before breaking down into a hearty laugh.

The four of us looked at each other with expressions of even greater confusement as even Darvus looked bewildered. Soldiers, drawn in by the uncontained laughter of Art, gathered around our camp, trying to figure out what was going on.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to offend,” Art finally spoke, stifling in his laughter. “After spending what felt like a lifetime with those old coots, I just thought that what you said was quite refreshing.”

“Thank you?” Darvus replied, still trying to figure out whether to be offended or pleased with Art’s remark.

“Sure, as long as lives aren’t at stake, I’m fine with a duel,” Art said with a content smile, getting up from the stump he was sitting on.

As the two guys began making their way toward the southern wall of the cavern, the group of curious soldiers eagerly followed behind them.

“Do you know what this is about?” I asked Caria as the three of us trailed behind the group.

My petite teammate merely let out a sigh as she shook her head. “Something about him feeling insecure because Arthur is younger and supposedly stronger than he is.”

“Not to mention he’s pretty bitter that Arthur is better-looking than him too,” Stannard added, letting out a deep breath as well.

“What? So that’s what he meant by a ‘man’s pride’?” I blurted, dumbstruck.

“Yeah, I know. He’s hit a new low.” Caria nodded, looking at my expression. “I wonder if all men are like that?”

We both turned to Stannard who looked back at us with an unamused raised brow.

“On behalf of all men, allow me to say that we aren’t all like that.”

“Maybe not all, but it has to be a majority, right?” Caria asked, making me giggle.

Letting out a defeated sigh, Stannard nodded. “Probably.”

We got to the makeshift dueling grounds just in time to see them about to begin. It seemed like the entire camp had stopped what they were doing to watch the two go at it. I could understand the soldiers being curious about Art’s strength since we had only seen the aftermath of his fight, but I didn’t expect to see Dresh at the front, eagerly waiting in anticipation next to the Twin Horns. The usually impartial Helen, leader of the Twin Horns, was enthusiastically rooting for Art as the rest of her party cheered him on. Soldiers from this expedition who had all seen Darvus in action and knew of his prowess cheered for him with whistles and hoots.

Beside me, Caria let out a groan. “Who am I supposed to root for?”

“Shouldn’t it obviously be to your childhood friend?” I teased, snickering at the sight of Darvus pompously receiving the cheers with his chest puffed out. Sylvie, who was still in my arms, shifted in her sleep from the noisy crowd, taking a quick peek before deciding that her sleep was more important.

“Hey! We don’t always have to choose our childhood friends,” Caria replied, shaking her head at Darvus’s unseemly attitude.

“You kind of do, Caria,” Stannard snorted, turning his gaze toward my arms. “Anyway, I didn’t ask before but it’s been on my mind; what sort of mana beast is Arthur’s bond anyway?”

“You wouldn’t believe me even if I told you,” I smirked, focusing on the mock duel ahead.

Art was leisurely standing with his left hand leaning on the pommel of his sword as Darvus began juggling his axes to put on a show for the crowd to see.

“Just before you came, Tess, he was in such a sour mood. Now look at him; God, I swear, he has the emotional stability of a four-year-old,” Caria grumbled.

“Probably even younger,” I chuckled, remembering how mature Art was when he was four years old.

One of the soldiers, a seasoned augments, volunteered himself to be the referee and stood between Darvus and Art with his hand held up.

"I'm sure the general consensus is that we'd like to keep this cavern in one piece, so I want you both to keep mana usage strictly to body augmentations. Is that clear?" the soldier asked, taking a glance at Dresh for confirmation.

Getting the approval from the leader of this expedition as well as two consenting nods from Darvus and Art, the soldier swung down his hand. "First to yield or otherwise be incapacitated loses. Begin!"

Chapter 136

As Quickly As He Had Appeared

STANNARD BERWICK'S POV:

At the referee's signal, the match began.

All traces of pompousness from Darvus disappeared as he carefully circled around Arthur. As our leader's childhood friend remained standing in the same position, Darvus continued to side-step around him, warily looking for an opening.

Darvus had in his hand two identical axes that differed only in color. These two weapons were precious family heirlooms that had been passed down generation to generation to the strongest practitioner of their Clarell style of axe-wielding. The two axes looked more like misshapen swords with blades melded right above the handle, not near the top. The flat of the blades had strange markings etched into both of them that didn't match the simple, unadorned handles of the weapons. I knew that Darvus was serious just from the fact that he took these weapons out. I'd only seen this pair of axes once, and that was only because Caria begged him to show us.

Darvus continued to slowly circle Arthur, always keeping a steady position, never crossing over his legs in between steps. Arthur, for some reason, stayed completely still even as Darvus inched behind him.

Sweat beaded down the sides of Darvus's face as he stopped right behind his opponent's open back. The only sound inside the cavern was the faint rushing of water from the stream as the crowd's cheering subsided. Everyone stared anxiously at the two contestants, not doubting the reason for Darvus's hesitation despite his advantageous position.

After another slow sidestep, Darvus lowered his position and launched himself at Art's back. I couldn't help but become involuntarily drawn into the battle as Darvus closed the five-meter gap in just two quick steps.

Darvus had both his axes loaded to his right in preparation for what looked like an upward swipe, but as soon as he was about to get in distance, Darvus abruptly veered

course. Steering clear of the seemingly still Arthur, Darvus went back to his original distance, his forehead drenched in sweat as his chest heaved in and out for air.

“What was that, Darvus?” a soldier cried out.

“Stop being a wimp!” another voice shouted.

Tessia, Caria and I exchanged glances, unsure of what was going on with Darvus. It hadn’t even passed the two-minute mark since this duel had started, yet he looked to be in worse shape than that one time our team had been locked in a battle for several hours.

It was impossible for Darvus to be this tired after just a few minutes, but it wasn’t the only thing that confused me.

I’d been with Darvus as he mercilessly hacked away at A class mana beasts with cruel efficiency, and beat down adventurers twice his size and in the same class with a content smile on his face, so I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Even from here, I could make out the distinct features of an emotion that I had thought the battle-hungry Darvus lacked: fear.

At the discontent hollers of a few more soldiers, Darvus clicked his tongue before snapping out at the crowd to shut up.

Taking a deep breath, Darvus lowered his center of gravity with renewed fervor in his eyes as he stared attentively at Arthur—who may as well have been a statue at this point.

The edges of my teammate’s two axes glowed amber as he lowered them so that the tips were touching the ground. Darvus stomped his right foot as if he was about to leap toward his opponent, but instead, he stayed rooted as he swiped both of his axes upward in a cross.

Darvus's spell caused a trail of fine grain to follow his two blades before shooting out in a cross-shaped attack

As the crescent of pebbles shot out towards Arthur, I couldn’t help but admire the effectiveness of the spell. While normal grains of sand didn’t strike fear into my heart, at break-neck speeds, they could put dozens of small holes in unsuspecting opponents.

The fine, earthen barrage reached its target almost instantly, but rather than poke holes or even break skin, the pebbles bounced off Tessia's childhood friend harmlessly, as if a toddler had thrown the sand at him.

At first, I thought Darvus had failed to properly cast the spell, but the remaining spray of grain that hadn't landed harmlessly on Arthur, dug into the cavern wall behind him with an explosion of consecutive crashes. Luckily, the spray hadn't hit any of the spectators near it, because the area where Darvus's spell had hit crumbled a layer of the cavern wall.

Everyone's gaze shifted back and forth in shock between Arthur, who had received the brunt of the attack with no harm, and the wall where a small cloud of dust had formed from the sheer force of the small cluster of rocks. Everyone in the entire cavern was in a silent display of surprise and awe—everyone except for Darvus. My spoiled friend had a discontent grimace on his face as if he knew that something like that would happen.

Arthur, on the other hand, finally turned around to face his opponent as he casually dusted off his sleeve where Darvus's spell had bounced off of him—not even his clothes damaged.

With another annoyed click of his tongue, Darvus leaped back as he dug his axes into the ground once more at another attempt to stone his opponent with sand. However, as Darvus swung his priceless weapons, Arthur raised a hand.

Suddenly, the trail of grains that were trailing behind my teammate's blades all dropped before fully manifesting into a spell. Darvus's eyes widened and I knew that somehow, his monster of an opponent had cancelled or stopped his spell from forming.

Darvus's frustration was evident on his face as he bit down hard on his lower lip, his eyebrows furrowed into a scowl. However, as Darvus continued to try and conjure his spells, from here, it simply looked like he was flailing his axes at a ghost in front of him.

"Damn it!" Darvus finally howled, locking gazes with Arthur, whose lips curled up just a tad at the edges. My wild-haired friend finally stopped attempting to attack from afar and moved in. He closed the gap and swiped savagely at the bare-handed Arthur. As his glowing axes created streaks of mana behind them, his opponent easily parried them with the back of his hand.

Darvus struck again—simultaneously this time—hoping to catch his opponent off guard, but Arthur merely dipped the right axe that was aimed at his head, and pivoted and parried the left axe that was aimed at his torso.

My teammate, however, kept his composure as he mixed it up, feinting to his left before veering, his other axe rising to quick-strike to the right. Arthur dodged the attack beautifully, maintaining a steady balance as his body dipped and weaved into a rhythmic trance.

Darvus's flurry of attacks, mixed with off-timed kicks and elbows, was relentless as the crowd—myself included—silently gawked at the spectacle of one attacked with monstrous speed and control while the other dodged or parried everything perfectly without damage even coming to his loose clothing.

My attention had been solely focused on the two of them for the entirety of the duel, so when Darvus suddenly dropped his axes and fell to his knee, I couldn't make sense of it.

From here, it looked like my stubborn and prideful friend had simply given up, but by the wide-eyed, stupefied gaze he had toward his opponent, I knew it wasn't that simple.

On his knees, Darvus raised his left shoulder—as if to swing his arm. However, his arm remained limp, dangling at his side. He then tried to get up. With his legs merely trembling, they gave out, causing Darvus to fall to his back.

The crowd murmured to one another as they exchanged raised brows and similar looks of confusion.

“W-What's going on? Why can't I move?” Darvus stammered as he remained sprawled on his back.

“You'll be fine, boy,” a husky voice called out reassuringly. “Right, Arthur?”

The familiar tone that came from behind was filled with power, immediately causing Darvus to fall silent. The rest of us all whipped around at the source of the voice.

I let out a frightened gasp before immediately dropping to my knee.

Dresh's voice, laced with surprise and apprehension, rang from within the crowd. “We

salute you, Commander Virion.”

As he said this, my gaze remained planted to the ground, not daring to look up until otherwise stated.

That was just the kind of figure he was to all of us.

I had read about Virion Eralith in textbooks and documentaries from during the time of the old war between humans and elves. He was king at the time, and from what I had read, an exceptional one. It was ultimately through his leadership and cunning that the human army, despite having an advantage in numbers, was forced to retreat in the end. It was no wonder why the Council, which comprised of the current kings and queens of their respective nations, turned to Commander Virion for guidance in this war.

I had the honor of meeting him once when I was first chosen to be placed in the same team as his granddaughter. At that time, I could only imagine her to be a spoiled, ill-mannered girl that wanted to chase after some lunatic fairytale. But I was wrong. She was stronger, more mature, and more dedicated to the war than I would ever be. If this was the girl that was raised by her grandfather, I could only imagine what kind of beast Commander Virion would be.

As we all remained genuflecting, I kept my ears open as two pairs of footsteps approached.

“He’s right,” Arthur’s voice rang from behind. “You’ll be back to normal soon.”

From the brief moment I had, I couldn’t recognize the peculiar-looking man beside Commander Virion. Most of his face was covered underneath a woolen hood, but his clean-shaven face and was sharp, a pair of thin, pursed lips hiding any signs of emotions.

“Arthur! Tessia,” Commander Virion’s rough voice called out once more. “With me.”

Footfalls, from what I assumed to be Arthur, approached me from behind as even Tessia made her way towards her grandfather as well.

After a few moments, our expedition leader told us to rise, the Commander, his companion, Tessia and Arthur all gone.

“What was all that about?” I asked in a hushed voice to Caria.

My friend shook her head. “I have no idea. I’ve never seen Commander Virion out on the field, and even then, coming all this way just for one person?”

“Seriously,” I agreed. “Even the high-ranking leaders back at the Wall rarely get to communicate with Commander Virion directly.”

“Well, it makes sense since his granddaughter was here, right?” Caria inquired.

“I’m not so sure about that,” I murmured before remembering my injured friend. “Caria! Darvus!”

The two of us hurriedly made our way over to our teammate that was still lying on his back. Kneeling beside him, Caria lifted her childhood friend’s head and placed it in her lap. “Darvus, are you okay?”

“Y-Yeah,” he huffed. “I can move my fingers and toes now, at least. What happened? I thought I heard a familiar voice? Who was it?”

“It was Commander Virion!” I answered, rolling up Darvus’s sleeves to take a better look at his condition.

“What?!” he cried, attempting to get up before falling back into Caria’s lap with a groan.

“Stay still, idiot. You’re hurt!” Caria chided. “Anyway, you heard Commander Virion. He said you’ll be okay, and I don’t think Arthur hit you with the intent to cripple you.”

“Thanks.” Darvus rolled his eyes. “Because the one thing a guy wants to hear after getting his ass handed to him is that his opponent wasn’t even trying.”

I turned my attention back to his arm and noticed a strange welt near his wrist and the inside of his elbow. What was weirder was that I felt a trace of mana coming from the red bruises.

Without a word, I ripped open Darvus’s shirt, eliciting a shout of protest from my friend and a squeal from Caria. Just as I had expected, more red welts littered his body.

“Darvus, did you not feel that you were getting hit while you were attacking?” I asked.

“Must’ve been the blood rushing to my head. I didn’t feel a thing,” he answered. “Why? Is it that bad?”

“It’s not that.” I shook my head. “But the locations of all of these welts that you have are in very important places.”

“What do you mean?” Caria chimed in, taking a peek underneath her childhood friend’s shirt with flushed cheeks.

“I’ve read a few books on mana flow anatomy—you know, the theory behind the movement of mana inside a mage’s body—and one of them mentioned that there are known to be areas where clusters of mana channels coalesce. Naturally, these areas are naturally more protected when an augments strengthens his body, but if properly struck, it can inhibit the flow of mana to that particular region.”

“Oh! I studied that too! My trainer taught me about. But it couldn’t be that he was able to hit those, right? My trainer said it was impractical—almost impossible—to target them in battle because of how small and protected these points are,” Caria exclaimed.

“True,” I acknowledged, “and I read that these coalition points differ in each person. But, I can’t help but think these marks are related to that.”

“Well, it would explain the marks, but it doesn’t explain why Darvus suddenly fell down like a broken doll—”

“Hey!” Darvus glared from the ground.

“Excessive Mana Discharge,” I stated, my eyes glued to Darvus’s fading wounds.

“You mean backlash? Isn’t that when a mage uses too much of his mana?” Caria inquired. “I’ve seen Darvus use much more mana-heavy spells for longer periods than this.”

“Well, if Tessia’s childhood friend was able to hit all these coalition points, the mana leakage from these areas could potentially cause backlash. Of course this is only assuming that he was somehow able to locate these miniscule coalition points,” I clarified, wondering how in the hell Arthur had even managed to hit him without anyone—not even Darvus himself—realizing.

“How about we stop admiring the man who left me in this state and help me up?! I

think I can walk with some help now,” Darvus interrupted, gingerly wiggling his legs.

As Caria and I helped our friend to his feet, we slowly made our way toward the tent that Commander Virion was in, along with Arthur and Tessia, hoping to be the first to hear any new updates.

However, as we neared the large white tent, Tessia stormed out with a discontent scowl etched onto her creamy face.

“Tessia! Over here!” Caria called out, but the princess ignored her. Moments later, Commander Virion and Arthur, along with the mysterious companion that the Commander arrived here with, came out of the tent.

The hooded man lifted an arm and a teleportation gate conjured out in the space in front of him. The soldiers that were lingering nearby, evidently bored with nothing to do, all jumped at the sudden manifestation of the gate.

“Are they leaving?” Darvus asked, his arms wrapped around our necks.

My eyes were fixated on the three figures as they approached the gate. Commander Virion was the first to go and behind him was the hooded figure. Before Arthur stepped in through the gate with his bond, he looked at us with a regretful—almost apologetic—expression. I couldn’t hear his voice from the distance, and I wasn’t even sure he had actually spoken aloud, but I clearly understood the words formed from his lips—‘take care of her until I return.’

He disappeared into the light as the teleportation gate closed behind him.

Chapter 137

Arrival

ARTHUR LEYWIN'S POV:

As I stepped into the large white tent, I was immediately pulled into a bearhug by Grampa Virion.

"Damn you, boy! Why didn't you tell me you came back?" He loosened his grip on me, grasping me at arm's length to get a better look.

"Nice to see you again, Gramps." I turned to acknowledge the hooded asura. "Aldir."

"Arthur. Lady Sylvie," he greeted back. "Much has changed in both of you."

"I certainly hope so," I chuckled, Sylvie nodding slightly in response. "How did you know I had arrived here so quickly?" I turned back to Virion.

"Lord Aldir received a message from Lord Windsom," Virion answered. "He said you were sent down here somewhere so I came right away."

"To think you were sent where Tessia was stationed. Tell me, was this Wren's doing?" Aldir chimed in, an amused tone in his voice.

I nodded, turning my gaze to my silent childhood friend. "Has his sense of humor always been so... droll?"

"Wren has always seen himself as whimsical despite his often indifferent attitude," the asura acknowledged.

"I was so surprised to see him when we were expecting to battle a mutant," Tessia voiced, shaking her head.

"Yeah. As soon as I had arrived, a horde of mana beasts attacked me and Sylv. We didn't even have time to catch our breaths until after we had killed all of them," I sighed, petting my bond.

“But what about the door? When we arrived at the scene, the mana beasts outside the room you were in had all died,” Tessia pressed. I knew she had been curious about a thousand things since my arrival, but I could tell by Aldir and Virion’s arrival that we were short on time.

“Not now, chil—Tessia,” Virion amended, placing a hand on his granddaughter’s shoulder. “There are things I must discuss with Arthur, and this isn’t the right place to do so.”

“We’re leaving?” Tessia responded, shifting glances between her grandfather and Aldir.

The asura shook his head. “Not you, Tessia. You are to stay here.”

“What? Arthur got here a few hours ago and you’re already taking him away?” Tessia replied, fear evident in her eyes.

“Tess,” I cut in. “Don’t worry. I’ll be right back after debriefing.”

“Besides, you have your team to look after. With this dungeon cleared, I’m sure everyone will soon depart from here. You have your own battles you are responsible for, right?” Virion added. “That is what we agreed upon when I allowed you to take part in this war.”

“Yes. ‘Work your way up from battles using your own strength,’” Tessia quoted, letting out a defeated sigh.

I could practically see my childhood friend’s nonexistent tail droop in sorrow at this news, but I knew whatever Virion had to tell me was important.

“Then let’s head out immediately. Tessia, you’ve gotten stronger these past few months. The battles you’ve been through are certainly molding you well enough,” Aldir noted, giving her an approving nod.

“Thank you, Master.” Tessia dipped her head, but her bitter expression didn’t change.

I was taken by surprise at the relationship between the two. I never expected the one-eyed asura to take Tessia under his wing, but I kept those thoughts to myself.

Tessia gave a quick bow to her grandfather and her master before heading out of the

tent. As she lifted the tarp flap, she looked back at me with a gaze that held a myriad of emotions.

"I'll see you soon," I smiled as she left.

"Shall we depart?" Aldir confirmed.

With a nod from the two of us, we headed out of the tent as well.

Outside, before stepping into the teleportation gate that Aldir had conjured, I locked eyes with Tessia's teammate, Stannard, and muttered for him to take care of Tessia for me.

I hadn't meant for him to hear it, but Stannard seemed to understand as he nodded meaningfully.

It took us a few minutes after stepping through the gate to arrive at the floating castle that the Council had made their base, the reason being that the flying fortress constantly moved miles above the ground without a set pattern or destination.

After our distorted surroundings focused, I noticed we had arrived inside a small, cylindrical room with no windows and only one set of double iron doors.

'How come you didn't talk to Tess back there?' I asked my bond as she scampered along next to me.

'A lady needs to have a secret or two,' Sylvie voiced coyly.

'Oh, you're a lady now?' I shook my head. Somewhere along the last two years, my bond had gained the ability to talk freely, but for some reason, she chose not to speak unless it was with me.

'I'll surprise Tessia with it next time,' she replied, giggling to herself.

Virion and Aldir both looked back, obviously curious as to what my bond and I were discussing mentally.

Talking wasn't the only ability that Sylvie had gained throughout her training, but because of her young age, most of the time was spent fortifying her body so that her mana and aether abilities wouldn't run amok.

Lord Indrath had personally taught her how to strengthen her body, which was unique to the dragon race of asuras. Apparently, almost all young asuras faced the danger of their body being unable to withstand their innate abilities.

“Well, since we’re all here, let’s go out,” Virion announced with a smile.

At the signal from the gateman, the large iron doors clicked and squealed with the lock mechanism going off. The groan of metal on gravel filled my ears as the thick metal exit opened from the center.

I had expected a guard or two to be on the other side of the doors, but instead, a rather large dark bear towered over me. It gazed down viciously, the two white markings above its eyes shaping its expression into something of a scowl. It stood about three meters high, its hind legs rooted to the ground and its chest exposed to reveal a tuft of white fur just below its neck. Despite its angry-looking eyes, its exposed teeth gave the impression of a smile, two rows of white daggers protruding jaggedly out of its mouth.

“Brother!” a melodious voice chirped.

For a split second, I thought it was the bear that had spoken, but Ellie, my little sister, appeared from behind the beast with goofy grin on her immature face.

While subtle, my sister had definitely changed over these past few years. Her ash-brown hair ran freely down her shoulders instead of in pigtails which she had sported when she was younger. While her dark round eyes still shined with innocence, her thoughtful gaze toward me contained a profound maturity.

“Ellie!” I picked my sister up into a hug as she wrapped her arms around my neck and swung around me.

“Arthur!” another pair of voices called out. It was my parents.

After putting her down, I turned to my parents. I stood still, tense. Feelings of doubt and remorse kept me from giving my parents a hug. I didn’t know how to greet them after how we last separated.

“Come here, Son!” My father ran up and encircled me, wrapping me tightly in his arms.

“I-I don’t understand,” I stammered, taken aback by their actions. “I thought—”

“Thought what?” my father interrupted. “That just because you have memories of whatever previous existence you had, you could stop being my son?”

I chuckled as my father let me go. My mother, who had remained a few feet away, anxiously approached. My mind flashed back to how she had so desperately tried to deny everything, and I lost what little confidence I had to greet my mother.

Each slow step she took toward me made the lump in my throat grow larger. I looked down as her foot was just inches away from mine. I couldn’t look her in the eye.

Suddenly, my mother clasped my hands tightly, bringing them close to her.

“Give me some time,” she whispered as drops of tears landed on our hands. “I’m trying. I really am. Just give me some time.”

As though a stone encasing shattered around my body, a wave of happiness and relief washed over me as I accepted her sincerity.

“Of course,” I nodded, unable to look at my mother for fear that I’d cry as well.

“Brother! Brother!” my sister chirped as she held Sylvie in her arms. “Say hi to my Boo!”

As my mother released me from her grasp, I cleared my throat and took another hard stare at the giant mana beast.

“Your B-Boo?” I repeated incredulously, looking at my sister and back at Virion and Aldir. I knew that the mana beast wasn’t an enemy, but I hadn’t realized he belonged to my family.

“Yup!” she nodded. “Boo, say hi to Brother!”

Boo and I locked gazes for a second until the mana beast smirked at me. Raising a giant paw, Boo swung down at me.

Raising an arm, I immediately willed mana into my body. At the force of Boo’s attack, the ground below my feet cracked.

I stared at my sister in shock with the bear’s paw still weighing down on my arm.

"I see that Boo has quite the temper." I grabbed the beast's wrist and pulled down, bringing him down to my eye level.

"Boo just wanted to see if you were as strong as I told him you were. He's a bit competitive like that," she shrugged as her bond struggled to free himself from my grasp. "Bad Boo!"

"Wait. Ellie, you can talk to this beast? Are you bonded to it?" I sputtered. The strength of this mana beast had surprised me, but the fact that it was able to converse mentally with my sister meant that Boo was quite a high-level beast.

"Lord Windsom didn't mention this?" Virion asked from behind. "He gave this mana beast to your family as a gift before you guys departed to Epheotus."

"No, he did not mention anything of the sort," I shook my head, still in a daze at the turn of events. "So Windsom just handed this giant stuffed animal to my sister so what, she can ride it out to battle?"

Boo let out a disgruntled sniff at my words.

"Yes, I called you a teddy bear," I retorted, still holding onto his paw.

"No, he was just a baby when Windsom gave him to us," my mother smiled. "Though I have to say, Boo grew quite fast over these past two years."

"I'll say," my father agreed, chuckling to himself.

"Well, I'm sure you would like to catch up with your family, Arthur, but let's make it after our discussion," Aldir voiced in a serious tone. "Your family is living here for the time being, as I thought it would be in your best interest."

"Right. Thank you," I nodded, turning back to my family. "I'll talk to you guys soon, okay?"

I gave everyone, except for Boo, a hug, and followed Virion and Aldir down the narrow corridor to the meeting room.

Sylvie trotted close behind, taking another look back at Boo. 'Do you want me to beat him up for you?'

‘I can take care of him myself,’ I smirked, reaching down to pet my bond.

As we arrived inside the guarded room, we sat around a large circular table. It was only the three of us inside the rather blandly decorated meeting area so there were quite a bit of empty chairs spaced throughout.

“Just us?” I looked around. “What about the kings and queens, and the lances? I thought I’d at least be seeing Directory Goodsky here.”

The asura, Aldir, pulled back the hood that had covered most of his face to reveal his purple eye that glowed in the center of his forehead. He first looked to Virion and nodded at him.

As Tess’s grandfather turned to me, I noticed just how tired and burdened he looked compared to how he was before the war. “Cynthia is currently in a state of self-induced slumber to cope with the effects of the curse she had activated by disclosing intel on the Alacryans.”

“It’s that bad?” I exclaimed. The report that Windsom had shown me did mention of the director’s condition, but never to the point of her being in a comatose state.

“Mhmm,” the elderly elf nodded solemnly. “I’ll show you where she’s resting later, but I’m sure there are quite a few other things you’re curious about.”

I nodded in reply as I went through all of the questions I had on my mind. For each question I bombarded the two leaders of this war with, they patiently answered back. I learned that, while my family was being held here for protection, the Helstea family had gone elsewhere. Vincent was using his resources in trade to assist the war efforts. It was a bit worrisome to think that they might become exposed to danger, but it seemed that the Helsteas mostly stayed in the background—never getting involved anywhere close to where the real battles were.

As for the former king and queen of Sapin, the two reported back to the castle every now and then, but they’d actually been spending most of their efforts in the Kingdom of Darv, hoping to gain the allegiance of the dwarves for this war, while Curtis and Kathlyn Glayder did what Tess had done—joined or made a team to get some experience in real battle for the actual war.

“Has my father or mother ever thought about fighting in the war as well?” I quizzed.

“Your father has,” Virion answered. “But, I told him to restrain himself until either you returned or until Eleanor is a bit older. He was insistent on helping out, but I made a strong case.”

“Thank you. I can't imagine if my father had died in the war while I wasn't even here,” I sighed.

As Virion continued explaining the status of the war and much about the strategies implemented to keep the citizens safe, I silently listened, staring idly at my bond who was listening to him as well.

“Is something the matter, my boy?” Virion queried. “You’ve been awfully quiet.”

“It’s nothing,” I smiled. “Although, I am a bit anxious to hear what you guys actually brought me all the way here for, seeing as you wanted to keep your own granddaughter in the dark about everything. And I know you didn’t just bring me here so that I could meet my family.”

“Yes. Well, Tessia is ambitious and has trained diligently in order to make a contribution in this war...” Virion’s voice trailed off.

“But, you still worry for her safety more than anything else,” I finished for him. “So that whole speech you apparently gave her on working her way up to the main battle was just a way to stall for time?”

Letting out a sigh, Virion nodded. “Can you blame me?”

I shook my head. “I would’ve done the same thing.” “How bad is this ‘main battle’ anyway?” I asked, shifting my gaze between the two figureheads of this war.

“As of now, the main fight is at the Wall, where a fortress had been built that spans across the Grand Mountains. Not a single mutant or Alacryan soldier has been able to leave the Beast Glades so far thanks to this defense line.” Despite the good news, Virion let out a deep breath.

“I’d like you to weigh in here just based on what we told you so far,” Aldir voiced in a tone that suggested he was testing me.

I thought for a moment. “Let me see if I have this right. From what you guys have dealt with so far, it seems like the Alacryan Army’s plan is to somehow infect certain mana

beast leaders so that they can control the beasts to lead their own hordes to fight for them. That, along with the Alacryan mages that have been using hidden teleportation gates set up by spies to bolster the size of their soldiers here on Dicathen adds up to be a pretty dangerous fighting force.”

“Agreed,” Aldir acknowledged.

“But it’s suspicious.” I studied Aldir and Virion’s faces. “I mean, I understand that the Beast Glades is the perfect territory for them to establish, especially if they have a few S class or SS class mana beasts under their control, but it seems too straightforward. If none of them were able to get through this defense, it either means that our side is that much stronger, or that they’re stalling for time. And by the look on your face, Virion, I’d say it’s the latter.”

“Evidence that has come to light not too long ago has confirmed our suspicions,” Virion agreed, a sympathetic tone in his voice. “Now, Arthur. I can’t have you blaming yourself for what I’m about to tell you.”

“What is it?” I raised my brow.

Aldir pulled out something from underneath the table and slid it over to me.

They were pictures of an abandoned ship. By the structure and frame of it, I was certain I had seen something like this before.

“It’s not the Dicatheous, if that’s what you’re wondering,” Aldir explained. “After seeing this, the artificer, Gideon, finally admitted where he got the ingenious idea of the so-called ‘steam engine’ he was so proud of.”

I looked over the pictures one more time, trying to convince myself from accepting what my brain had already figured out.

“That was a ship built by the Alacryans using your designs,” Virion revealed, his voice grim.

Before I had the chance to respond, the dark wooden door to the meeting room suddenly flew open as an armored soldier desperately stumbled into the room.

“Commander, Lord,” the soldier greeted hurriedly, still trying to catch his breath.

“What is it?” Virion asked impatiently.

“Th-They’ve been sighted, Commander. Approaching the western coast.” The soldier’s voice quivered in restrained fear. “The sh-ships.”

Chapter 138

To Right My Wrong

I bolted up from my seat at the soldier's news. "Where exactly did you see them?"

"J-Just a few miles south of Etistin... Sir," he replied, hesitant on what to call me because of my age.

I rushed past the guard and headed out the door. "Come on, Sylv."

"Wait! Arthur, what are you thinking?" Virion called from behind, his voice laced with concern.

"I want to see exactly what sort of mess I made," I responded without turning back.

Sylvie and I sped toward the teleportation gate room, dodging past several surprised workers and guards.

Upon reaching the familiar double iron doors we had come through, we saw two guards that weren't there before guarding either side of the doors.

"Please open the doors," I requested, impatience evident in my voice.

The male guard, clad in heavy armor with a longsword strapped to his back and two smaller blades bound to both sides of his waist stepped forward with a stern expression. "All entries and exits are to be approved of by either Commander Virion or Lord Aldir. We haven't heard of your departure from either of them so no can do, kid."

"Look, I just came back to this castle with Virion and Aldir. They know I'm heading out, so I insist that you let me through," I argued.

"Commander Virion and Lord Aldir," the guard reiterated. "No matter how lofty you think you royal kids are, learn some respect for your elders."

The female conjurer that looked to be middle-aged, dressed in a lavish robe and a hood

that covered her hair, quickly intervened, hoping to quell the situation. She spoke in a gentle voice as if she was talking to a child. "It's dangerous for you to go out alone in these times. Maybe if you have a guardian you—"

She stopped in her tracks as she choked on her last words. Both the guards crumbled to their knees as they clawed at their throats desperately. They gasped for air like fish out of water as I took another step forward, looking down at them with an innocent smile. "It'd be wise of you not to patronize me."

I withdrew the pressure I had released to make my point and helped them to their feet. "Let's try this again."

The two of them scrambled toward the door and released the lock. The heavy doors groaned against the gravel floor as I rushed through and made my way toward the center of the room.

"Sir. Set the gate to Etistin, please," I requested, letting out a sigh. I felt a bit guilty for being so harsh toward people just doing their jobs, but my mood wasn't exactly stellar either.

The elderly gateman exchanged hesitant glances with the disheveled guards but otherwise relented. As the glowing portal buzzed and hissed, the view of Etistin came into focus.

Without a word, Sylvie and I stepped through the gate once more, my heart thumping heavily the closer I got to my destination.

Arriving at an unfamiliar room filled with guards on the other side, I stepped down from the elevated stage that held the gate, Sylvie just a few steps behind.

"Who let a child through the secured gates?" the barrel-chested leader barked at the hunched gateman.

"He's from the Castle, Sir," he responded meekly, staring at me curiously.

It was troublesome that everyone thought of me as just a child even though I was well into my teens. I was taller than many of the guards present, but my unruly long hair and adolescent appearance seemed to keep any of the soldiers from taking me seriously.

Without the patience to explain my situation, I made my way toward the exit, walking past the large leader.

“Kid! What’s your business here? Don’t you know the state this city is in?” The armor-clad soldier that stood at least a head above me gripped my arm tightly, jerking me back.

“Commander Virion sends me here. Now, please open the doors before I make my own,” I warned.

The leader scoffed, rolling his eyes. “Yeah, sure. Commander Virion sent the likes of some thin pretty-boy here. I bet you’re just a runaway noble brat that had a tantrum. Lest, Scraum, take the boy back through the gates! I don’t need more civilians to be taken care of here!”

Letting out a sigh, I willed mana, allowing it to surge out of my body as I had done back at the castle.

Many of the soldiers present were augmenters, so they knew exactly what was happening as everyone helplessly fell to the ground. The very air in the room froze as the soldiers stared wide-eyed in shock at one another. The gateman, being an ordinary civilian, couldn’t handle the pressure and had been knocked unconscious.

“Sylv. Let’s get out of here.”

‘But the door—’

I glanced around the room to see some of the more capable mages already calling for backup.

“I’ll make one,” I replied curtly, not wanting to create an even bigger scene.

‘Sounds good.’

The white fox-like body of my bond began glowing until she was fully enveloped in a shroud of golden light. With a thunderous burst of mana radiating out of her body, Sylvie’s form changed into that of a pitch-black dragon. Over the past few years, her form had become much more distinguished and mature. Small details like the shape of her horns and her scales, which now looked like thousands of small polished gemstones, all made Sylvie appear fearsome yet ethereal.

The soldiers that were still conscious let out stifled cries at the turn of events, but I didn't waste any time enjoying their distress.

Lifting my hand, I coalesced the rampant mana gathered at my palm.

[Lightning Surge]

A barrage of blue lightning bombarded the ceiling above us, shaking the entire room. I jumped on top of Sylvie as she beat her wings to lift us up.

As we shot through the hole I had created, the gasps and screams from the civilians and soldiers below us soon softened the higher we reached into the sky.

The crisp winter air whisked past my cheeks as we ascended above the clouds until we could see the setting sun turn orange against the horizon. The beauty of Dicathen was in full view, laid out like a canvas below. I took a brief moment to relish the peaceful sight, from the snowcapped mountains and grassy plains to the sparkling ocean and lush forest, before directing Sylvie toward the south.

'Let's make it there before nightfall,' I advised, leaning forward on Sylvie's large back.

'Roger,' she chimed back, her voice still chirpy despite her intimidating appearance.

The land sped past us in a colorful blur as if the very background was being pulled out from underneath. I thickened the layer of mana around me to protect my clothes against the sharp winds.

As we headed south, the sight of cities soon became visible the closer we headed toward the coastline.

'Let's get lower, Sylv,' I transmitted, hunching my shoulders.

My bond tucked in her massive wings as she fell into a steep dive toward the cliffs just above Trelmore City. We barreled through the clouds that obscured our vision, shooting down like a black meteor. As we descended, the glittering sea soon came into view, and along with it, the direct effect of my thoughtless blunder.

I cursed aloud at the nightmarish sight ahead, my words getting lost in the wind. As we landed on a vast, snow-covered precipice at the edge of the forest overlooking Trelmore City and the ocean, I jumped off my bond, cursing once more, this time, my

voice echoing around us as if mocking me.

I could only stare in silence at scene.

Hundreds of ships approaching from the glowing horizon, not more than a few dozen miles away from shore, making their forces stationed in the Beast Glades seem like nothing more than a speck.

Virion's last piece of advice popped into my head at that moment. He told me not to blame myself, but it was all that I could do at this moment.

This being my second life, I had insight and knowledge that people of this world didn't have. Despite this knowledge and my wisdom, I didn't think about the consequences that would arise from a seemingly harmless act that would benefit those around me.

Memories of the day I had given Gideon the blueprints for the steam engine became all too clear and agonizing. Because of my advice, a ship that could be built to traverse the ocean had ended up in the wrong hands. I couldn't help but ask myself if the Vritra Clan getting their hands on this technology was what expedited the war that they had been evidently preparing.

"This doesn't look too good," Sylvie muttered as she gazed at the ominous view ahead.

"No, it doesn't. And it's my fault," I sighed, a mix of dread and guilt churning inside the pit of my stomach.

I stared ahead, lost in a daze as millions of thoughts ran through my head. I had shed tears, sweat, and blood these past two years so that I could protect this land and the people in it and to stop the Vritra from taking over this entire world. But it wasn't that simple anymore.

Hopping back onto my bond, I gently patted her neck.

"Let's go back, Sylv. We've got a war to win," I said through clenched teeth.

I wasn't some righteous hero out to save the world. Hell, I couldn't even call myself a good samaritan hoping to do his best to fight for his people.

No. It was my fault that this war had progressed to this state. It was my fault that this fleet of ships was almost upon us, and it would be my fault when those ships arrive

and cause havoc on this land.

If I had a reason to fight, it would not be just to protect the few I held dear.

It would be to right my wrong.

CYNTHIA GOODSKY'S POV:

I was in a room or area—some space covered in complete darkness with only a single beam of light shining down at me.

“It is imperative that you give us as much information as possible,” a deep voice spoke from the shadows.

I felt my lips moving and my tongue forming words, but my voice would not come out. Instead, a sharp ring pierced into my brain.

“Your knowledge can win us this war, Director,” another voice, this one thin and hoarse, muttered from out of view. “Think of the millions of lives you can help save by cooperating.”

I agreed. I wanted to speak, but no audible sound could be produced. I fell to my knees as the ringing soon became unbearable, but the voices hidden in the shadows continued to pester me.

They wanted answers regardless of cost. They were desperate, but so was I.

“It’s okay for you to die from the after-effects of the curse. As long as we get the answers we need, your job is done,” a particularly melodic voice cooed.

‘I thought that the curse had been lifted by Lord Aldir,’ I wanted to protest, even though I knew that, deep down, my life had always been in danger. However, my voice betrayed me, and the torturous sound overtook my senses. My vision turned white as the pain began lessening.

I thought to myself that if this was what death felt like, I would welcome it wholeheartedly. I closed my eyes, yet my vision was still completely covered in a slate of white.

I began to wonder what would happen next when a darkened figure soon approached

me. Even as the figure got closer and closer, its features could not be distinguished. My only comfort lied in the fact that its outline seemed human.

As the featureless figure arrived in front of me, it bent down and extended a hand to help me up.

Truthfully, I was reluctant—even in whatever stage of death I was currently in.

However, curiosity bested my mistrust as I held out my hand, waiting for him to take it.

As our hands touched, the veil of shadow that had shrouded my mysterious helper disappeared.

I squeezed harder, realizing that the one I had locked hands with was Virion.

His hand was so warm. I wanted to reach out and embrace him, but my body wouldn't listen. Instead, I remained on the ground with his hand on top of mine. He held my hand so gently, like a newborn chick, as if my fingers would crumble at the slightest pressure.

I wanted to grab ahold of him with my other hand, but again, I could not move.

"I never apologized to you..." he began, muttering softly about how he hadn't stopped me, even when he realized what could happen to me. Virion's voice, normally so bright and confident, cracked and wavered as he spoke.

I pried my gaze off of Virion's hand and looked up at my old friend. His face was blurry, and I couldn't make out where his eyes were focusing on, but for some reason, I could see the tears in his eyes so clearly.

Suddenly, Virion released his grip, and he was again shrouded in darkness. As he walked away, I shouted at him to come back, but my voice didn't come out.

The featureless shadow that Virion had reverted into stopped momentarily and spoke again. It was hard to hear, and I couldn't make out some of the words, but I was comforted by them nonetheless. I no longer tried to shout at him to come back and accepted his departure.

As his figure disappeared into the white abyss, the scene shifted to a memory that I

had always taken comfort in came to life.

It was just after the end of the war between humans and elves. Both sides had tremendous losses and had agreed upon a treaty.

Virion, much younger at the time, was walking alongside me. The scene was exactly how I had remembered it, down to the field of wilted tulips that spread to our left.

As we walked down the paved path, my body moved on its own, but I didn't mind.

"What do you plan on doing now that the war is over?" Virion asked, his gaze fixated ahead.

After the war was over, I had planned on quietly observing the state of the continent—that had been my duty after all. But since I couldn't exactly tell the king of the elves that, I just shrugged mysteriously and hoped my charms would change the subject.

"I've known you for a few years now. Some of those years, we were enemies and some we weren't, but out of these years, I kept thinking to myself one thing." He held out a finger to emphasize his point.

"Oh?" My voice came out on its own. "And what was that? Your undying love for me?"

"Sorry, but no," he chuckled. "Did you forget I'm married?"

"That hasn't stopped any of the human nobles yet," my shoulders shrugged to feign innocence.

"We elves are loyal," he replied, shaking his head. "But I digress. What I thought was that you'd make a great mentor and inspiration. Hell, I could see you as some head of a prestigious academy, leading the upcoming youth to a greater future."

"Well that came out of nowhere," I responded, genuinely surprised. "What made you come to that conclusion?"

"A lot of things," he winked. "But seriously, you should think about starting off as a teacher. I know you'll grow to love it."

"Maybe I'll just open up an academy of my own." My lips curled upward into a smirk. "I've taken a liking to Xyrus City."

“An academy for mages atop a floating city,” he pondered. “I like it!”

My body stopped and I watched Virion as he continued walking. “Then what say we open the school together?”

Looking back over his shoulder, he stifled a laugh. “Yeah, and we can call it the Goodsky and Eralith School of Mages.”

I could feel my face flush from embarrassment.

“No, but maybe I’ll send my kids or perhaps my grandkids when they turn of age. That is, if your school is good enough for them,” he winked before turning back.

“I’m really going to make one, you know,” I huffed. “Just wait and see. Xyrus Academy will become the greatest institution for mages.”

“Xyrus Academy? In Xyrus City?” Virion tilted his head. “Not very original...”

“Well I can’t call it the Goodsky and Eralith School of Mages, now can I?” I retorted, puffing out my cheeks. “And you’ll be darn lucky if I let any of your descendants attend.”

“Ouch,” he chuckled. “Well, here’s hoping for the success of Xyrus Academy.” Virion raised an imaginary glass in his hand to a toast.

Seeing his joking expression, I kicked him in the shin, making him laugh aloud even more.

I remembered clearly wishing right then and there that this moment would never end. I also remembered the clear feelings of regret that I had not met this man sooner. Maybe if we had met earlier, my loyalty to my continent and to the Vritra could’ve wavered.

No. By this time, my heart had already wavered.

“I’m the one with the injured leg here,” Virion called out from ahead. “Hurry up.”

I stepped forward, hoping to catch up when a piercing pain bore a hole in my chest. The flower-filled scenery turned a shade of red. I looked down, finally having control over my body, only to see a black spike sticking out of me with my heart at the tip.

“Hurry up,” Virion called out again, this time from afar.

I reached out to him and called for him but I remained anchored by the pitch black spear jutting out of my chest.

As if the spear was reeling me back, the once pleasant scene I was reliving got sucked away from me. As my world faded into darkness, the sight of Virion walking away was the last thing I saw before a bone-chilling grip enveloped me. As I sunk deeper into the depths of the abyss pulling me in, I could’ve sworn I heard a childish voice apologize to me.

VIRION ERALITH’S POV:

A bloodcurdling scream jolted me awake. I didn’t know when I had fallen asleep, but my body immediately got up from my desk chair. Heading out of my study, I narrowly avoided a guard rushing in the direction of the shriek.

“C-Commander Virion,” he saluted, skidding to a stop.

“What is going on?” I looked around, watching the other guards all heading in one direction.

“I’m not sure, Commander. The scream seemed to have come from just a floor beneath.”

“There shouldn’t be anyone—Anna!” I gasped. The only occupied room just immediately below this level was Cynthia’s room, with Anna taking care of her.

The guard’s eyes widened as he turned and headed down. Immediately following behind, I pushed aside the horde of armored guards. Arthur’s family was just outside the door, but they were all staring inside. Everyone was staring inside.

Lifting my gaze, my eyes stopped at the scene just a few feet ahead.

“N-No,” I let out as I hobbled closer, unable to believe my eyes.

“H-How? Who?” I stammered, but Anna was just as shocked as she shook her head.

My head spun as the clutter of noise and murmurs around me became muffled. I took another step but my legs gave out underneath me and I stumbled against the bed

Cynthia Goodsky lay peacefully in bed, her arms by her side and a thin white sheet over her body. And out of her chest was a pitch-black spike jutting out, covered in blood. Covered in her blood.

An indiscernible howl ripped out of my throat as I sunk to my knees, clutching tightly at my old friend's cold, lifeless hand.



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